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# THE EXECUTOR



# THE EXECUTOR

A Novel

BY

MRS. ALEXANDER

AUTHOR OF

'THE WOOING O'T,' 'WHICH SHALL IT BE?' 'THE FRERES,' 'HER DEAREST FOE,'  
AND 'LOOK BEFORE YOU LEAP.'



IN THREE VOLUMES

VOLUME II.

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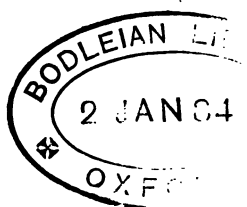
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## THE EXECUTOR.

### CHAPTER I.

IT was late on this eventful afternoon when Brooke, having walked back with his cousin after her visit to his friends, and refusing her invitation to come in, turned away, and strolled in the direction of his hotel, musing as he went on the conversation he had just had with Mrs. Harding. It had been unusually confidential, and yet she was never quite off her guard. "I suspect she has a hard time! What a destiny for a woman like Livy to be in the clutches of a great brute such as Harding! She ought to try and keep him down. I am certain she could. I imagine women credit us with far more resolution than we possess; but even if she could, what a life for a tender-hearted gentlewoman, to be perpetually bullying her husband! I wonder how

her friend Miss Stasie Verner would manage such a partner? She would either do it or bolt! How fond Livy seems to be of that girl! and yet they cannot, ought not, to suit each other. Miss Verner is bold and deep under her frank, open manner. A week ago I would have sworn she was as modest as she was honest. Still I hope she will not be drawn in to marry that Syrian. I don't like his sort of partnership with Harding."

So reflecting, Brooke reached Oxford Circus, and paused to watch for an opportunity to cross. It was the most crowded hour in the day, when the dwellers in the suburbs, having completed their shopping, were trying to find places in the numerous omnibuses coming up every moment from remote East Central regions.

Brooke was not in a hurry, and he looked with some amusement and a little compassion on the rush and scramble of those who were fighting for places. Among them his attention was attracted to a small, slight, exceedingly clerical-looking young man, pale and thin, with hay-coloured straight hair and a kindly look. As Brooke watched, the patient yet weakly persist-

ence with which again and again he strove to effect an entrance into the crowded conveyances, the pale face with its simple, honest expression grew more and more familiar to him. His whole attention was absorbed by the unsuccessful combatant; an old playground with its rough gravel, its eager games, its quick quarrels, its hearty reconciliations, its buzz of boyish voices, rose up before his memory. He stepped off the pavement, dived into the crowd, and, touching the young divine on the arm exclaimed, "Robinson—Jack Robinson! if I don't mistake?"

The clergyman turned quickly, looked a moment with a puzzled, surprised expression at his interrogator, and asked in his turn, "Why, it can't be Brooke, Jim Brooke?"

"Yes, it is Brooke; and he is heartily glad to have fallen in with you, old fellow! Are you absolutely obliged to wedge yourself into one of those detestable conveyances, or can you come with me?"

While they spoke they stepped aside from the throng.

"Well, you are the last man I should have expected to see. I thought you were in India?"

"I was; I have only returned about three months. And now, what are you going to do? Can you come and dine with me?"

"Yes, I will," cried Robinson with an air of decision. "I was on my way to dine with my aunt at Nottinghill; but I will telegraph to her; there is an office somewhere here."

This settled, the newly-met friends chartered a hansom, and bowled away to Brooke's hotel, where they soon sat down, in the highest good humour with themselves and each other, to enjoy the good things set before them.

A meeting like this is pleasantly and healthfully exhilarating. To Brooke it brought back something of youthful freshness from cricket-field and playground, and called up kindly memories of the bright, vague anticipations which they two had shared in the old days, when their chrysalis minds were working themselves clear of the cocoon which authority and childishness and the hesitation of undeveloped courage weave round the immature.

Brooke found the retrospect was cheerful and encouraging. He had made to the full as much way as he could expect.

He had sown the seed of future success, while young enough to see it bear fruit before he had reached middle age. Moreover, he could conscientiously fight for his own hand. He had no claims upon him. His father and mother were both dead, and his sole near relations were a couple of brothers, each doing fairly well in various parts of the British dominions.

“Now tell me something of yourself,” asked Brooke of his clerical friend with half unconscious pity for the narrow limits, the unavoidable monotony which must have hedged his career, as he had confessed that his farthest flight had been to Paris for a brief holiday, and that his highest success, which was owing more to good luck than to merit, was his appointment to a suburban incumbency called “Sefton Park.”

“Sefton Park !” repeated Brooke. “I have heard of that place. Whereabouts is it ?”

“Oh ! about three-quarters of an hour down the South-Western line ; a nice place enough, but a little disheartening. The people are all well-to-do and irreproachable, but not the slightest trace of devotional life amongst them. Now, if one had a district in the East End or at

the Docks that would be invigorating, there would be something tangible to fight against, some visible reform to fight for. It is true that at present we are in an embryo condition. We have only an iron church! Now, though it is necessary to make a beginning, these iron erections vex my soul; they are the very incarnation of modernism; they are so at variance with the order and spirit of the worship carried on within it, and, would you believe it? the congregation is content, perfectly content. We have gone on in this deplorable makeshift way for two years, and I have only collected a hundred and fifty pounds towards a stone edifice. Yet some of the congregation are wealthy, absolutely wealthy."

"I know a man who has property there—a Mr. Harding."

"Yes; he is about the largest proprietor at Sefton Park. He says as soon as I have three hundred pounds he will give another—which sounds liberal. A plain but suitable Gothic building to seat five hundred would cost two thousand pounds, and I really see no chance of arriving at that sum."

“That is a nuisance,” returned Brooke absently. “And the wife; do you know her?”

“Yes; a very charming woman! But she does not interest herself much in Church matters. I imagine her life is not of the smoothest. They say—but I never heed idle talk—that he is a man of violent temper, avaricious, harsh!”

“I am sorry to hear it,” said Brooke. “Mrs. Harding is a cousin of mine.”

“Oh, indeed! I had no idea. I am sure I should not have mentioned it. I have no doubt these reports are mere idle chatter.”

“Let us hope so,” replied Brooke, smiling at his companion’s readiness to repeat the mere chatter.

“At any rate he does not care much for appearances. He never by any chance comes to Church, not even when I persuaded the Bishop of Zanzibar to preach a sermon in aid of the building fund; but Mrs. Harding and the children are most regular in their attendance. It is a pretty place, and a nice country all round. You must really come down and see me, Brooke. I should be so pleased. I am most comfortable—too comfortable.”

“If you have only to complain of being too



comfortable, you are not much to be pitied. I will come to see you with great pleasure, however. And now, tell me, are you really content with your calling?"

"I should think I was! It is the noblest in the world," cried the young divine. "Now especially, when the Church is reasserting her rightful supremacy, and truth is growing clearer day by day."

"Is it? It seems to me that the enormous amount of vari-coloured light breaking in on every side tends rather to bewilder than to illumine."

"If you have but a sure guide, you will find nothing to bewilder in the present condition of things."

"A sure guide! That is indeed a *desideratum*!"

After long and cordial talk the friends separated with promises to meet again soon. Brooke in vain tried to persuade the ardent little churchman to steal a holiday, and accompany him in a trip to Switzerland and some of the old towns of Germany. This was not the time, he said, to think of personal pleasure, rather of earnest work and diligent conflict. So Brooke saw him into

the nine train—the last by which he could reach Sefton Park, which had a diminutive station all to itself.

When Stasie recovered herself after her scene with Kharapet, she hastened to pay her intended visit to her aunt, feeling curiously stunned and stupid, and therefore less keen to observe and cavil at a slight but decided change in Miss Stretton's tone as regarded their future plans.

She was as affectionate and admiring as ever. She was insatiable in her inquiries into every particular concerning the dance at Lady Pearson's; she wished ardently that she had seen her dear Stasie dressed for that festive occasion; she deeply regretted that nice charming Mr. Kharapet had not been of the party—poor fellow! *he*, no doubt, was inconsolable!

Stasie felt her cheeks burn at the sound of his name, but she kept herself very composed, and firmly resolved never to reveal the secret between them.

Then Miss Stretton poured forth a long catalogue of her complaints; and when Stasie attempted to cheer her by suggesting that travelling

would do her good and set her up, she shook her head, cleared her throat gently, and pressed her handkerchief to her eyes. "My dearest Stasie," she exclaimed, "I have no doubt you observe how low I am! Alas! I begin to fear the fates are against me! I fear that my digestion is radically wrong. If so, I must not venture abroad. I must resign the hope which for a moment brightened my dark horizon—the sweet hope of being *your* companion, *your* second mother! But self-preservation is imperative! To-morrow I am to have an interview with my medical adviser, and if he forbids my quitting England, why, I must let you go, dear child—go with some happier and healthier guide than myself." Here she wept very genuine tears, for she was dreadfully afraid of losing hold of her niece, whom she heartily liked, over and above the material advantages to be derived from her.

"Oh, dear! don't talk in that way, Aunt Clem! I am very sorry you are so ill. You must suffer awfully. I do hope the doctor will let you travel—at any rate in a month or two. Even if we do not go abroad, we might manage to live together. We shall see."

“My own dear Stasie ! I shall let you know what the doctor says at once. Perhaps a few weeks’ treatment would make a change. My only wish now is to be of use to you. I will write to you directly I have seen my medical man.”

The aunt and niece parted as usual with much warmth. Stasie, however, returned to her temporary home more depressed and disappointed than she had felt since her days of despondency at Miss Boaden’s. After all, she seemed doomed to fail in her grand scheme of emancipation and enjoyment.

That the difficulty should arise from Aunt Clem was indeed an unexpected misfortune. It was just the one obstacle that she could not fight against. If Aunt Clem’s health would not permit her to travel, why, there was nothing for it but to submit. Stasie decided that it would be better to wait for her recovery than to travel with any one else. Miss Stretton’s affection, admiration, and helplessness had laid fast hold upon her niece. To desert this kindly, lonely woman now, after giving her hopes of a brighter, happier, life, was impossible ; and Stasie decided to cling to her aunt in any case.

Though much attached to Mrs. Harding, she thought she would like something of a home of her own—a place to herself, where Kharapet could not come whenever he liked, and where, too, she thought in her inmost heart, dear Mrs. Harding might find a cheerful change from the monotony of her life. Still she clung to the hope that Aunt Clem's doctor might, after all, not forbid her to go to France or Italy. She (Stasie) so longed to get away where she should be free from all chance of seeing Kharapet, or hearing his voice; indeed she did not wish to see Dr. Brooke either—he had so evidently “warned her off.” This she felt the more keenly, because she acknowledged to herself with shame and contrition she had been on the verge of falling in love with him!

A man who was in no way moulded on the heroic lines she had imagined for a possible lover, simply a well-informed, well-bred, self-possessed gentleman of her own class, who showed her kindly attention until—by her own over-eagerness for conversation which interested her, and opinions which woke up her own mental powers—by her forwardness, in short, she had disgusted him. In

no other way could she account for his sudden withdrawal from the pleasant friendliness which had existed between them. Well, she would not again offend. He should have no further need to reject her advances or confidences; and yet, after all, he might have been vexed about something else, or bored, or preoccupied. Perhaps the next time they met he might be different. At any rate, it was disgracefully weak to think of him at all, and she had plenty of other matter whereon to exercise her thoughts.

She was silent and preoccupied that evening, which attracted her host's attention. He had recovered the effects of his rare appearance in society, and was inclined for conversation. So he attacked Stasie, who was pretending to work while thinking what she should do if Aunt Clem were pronounced too unwell to travel.

"What's the matter, Stasie? You seem rather in the doleful dumps. Have you quarrelled with Kharapet? I thought he was coming to dinner. Have you forbidden him, or what?"

"No. I have no quarrel with him. I knew nothing about his coming to dinner."

"I don't say I am inconsolable," returned Mr.

Harding with a chuckle. "He is a nice young man, I daresay (not so very young either), but one wants a man to be reasonable sometimes. He's a lively companion, eh, Stasie? lots to say on a variety of subjects. Never mind, he's a devilish shrewd fellow about business. You'd have to get up early to do *him*—even *you* would find he could hold the purse-strings tight, if you ever give them into his grip," and Harding looked sharply at her. Stasie, unsuspecting as she was, heard something in his tone that put her on her guard.

"Mr. Kharapet has always been most kind to me and liberal with, I presume, my own money. I am as grateful to him for giving me my own as if it were his; indeed more so, as I could not take it in any other case."

"By George! you'd have to bid high if you expected to bag any of Kharapet's cash; but nothing for nothing is the rule with all men of sense, except myself. I was out of my mind once, and have had to pay for my whistle."

"Not too dear, I hope," returned Stasie for the sake of saying something, and not understanding to what Mr. Harding alluded.

“Well, we will say no more about that,” he rejoined. “So you and Kharapet haven’t fallen out, hey?”

“I hope not; did he say we had?”

“No. I haven’t seen him to-day. Gad, I would like to tell him how you carried on with that swell son of old Pearson’s. He’d turn green, by Jupiter! Did you ever notice the colour he turns when he is vexed and dare not show it?”

“No, Mr. Harding. I would rather not see him vexed when he does all he can to please me—a great deal more than *you* do,” said Stasie stoutly. She felt angry with Mr. Harding. She thought he was talking treacherously of a man with whom he professed to be on the most friendly terms; and besides she was disposed to feel savagely towards most people just then.

“Hillo! are you bristling up for him?” exclaimed Mr. Harding in some surprise. “I fancied he had gone down below par with you.”

“Why?” asked Stasie shortly.

“Well, I don’t exactly know why, but you are right, Stasie; I thought I’d just try you. Kharapet is a very nice chap, and, I am sure, your staunchest friend, to say the least of it.”



Again he looked very keenly at her, but she did not answer. He was afraid he had been making a mistake in speaking as he did of Kharapet from some crookedness of motive we cannot at present follow. Perhaps she favoured the Syrian's pretensions. If so, Kharapet was a power to be pacified.

"More to please you than I do!" he repeated, reverting to her former reply. "Come, now, that is cruel and ungrateful, aint it, Livy?" to his wife.

"I really think you *both* devoted to Stasie's service," she returned, with a slightly scornful smile.

"There, you hear that?"

"Oh yes; you both do what you choose to do readily enough. But when I wanted something so very, very much, with my whole heart, you would not do it."

"When was that?" asked Mr. Harding, astonished.

"When I wanted to help Mrs. Mathews, you both laughed at me."

"Oh, but that was out of all reason. When you have more sense you will understand it all, and see we were right."

4 "More sense!" exclaimed Stasie. "Am I a fool now? I do not think I *am* quite. Pray, am I to go on in this way—thwarted at every turn, treated like a baby, and comforted with sugar-plums, for three long years (I shall not be eighteen all out till Sunday)? I feel inclined to make you wish the three years were over. I think I could give you trouble if I liked."

"Come, come! I protest you are unjust, Stasie. How do we thwart you? There never was a girl so petted; you are going to get your own way about your travels, and——"

"I do not think I am," interrupted Stasie.

"How so?" asked Mr. Harding with some eagerness.

"Because my aunt is so unwell. I doubt if she can come with me!"

"Ah!" exclaimed Mr. Harding with animation, and then stopped short.

"I am horribly vexed about it," returned Stasie frankly, as she began to fold up her work, "for I shall not go with any one else."

"Miss Stretton does not look very strong," remarked Mrs. Harding, to fill up the pause which ensued.

"No, poor dear thing," said Stasie. "I do not think she has had a very pleasant life. It is past nine, Mrs. Harding, and I am very tired. You will excuse me if I go to bed? Good-night, Mr. Harding;" and Stasie disappeared.

"I'm d——d if I know what to make of that girl," said Mr. Harding, looking after her.

"I don't think she is a complicated puzzle," replied his wife. "She is very candid and outspoken."

"You think so? Well, in some ways you are bright enough, Livy, and I thought you might be of use with Stasie Verner; but I have an idea she is too many for you."

"I am certain she is as honest and true as a girl can be," returned Mrs. Harding quickly, "but what do you mean about being of use with her? I am very glad to be of use to her!"

"There you go with your infernal fanciful trash! Your starting a devoted friendship with the girl is about as great a nuisance as if you refused to have anything to do with her. Don't you understand I don't want her to break with Kharapet, and I don't want her to accept him. You might be a great help in the business if you

liked, and you ought to be thankful to help me in any way, considering——”

He stopped expressively.

Mrs. Harding, who was making a dainty little pinafore, smiled a peculiar smile, and observed, “I should be very happy to prevent her accepting him, if it were necessary to exert any influence for that purpose, but you may make your mind easy. She never will.”

“Then whom does she fancy? At her age she will not like to be without a sweetheart. That young man she danced with last night?”

“Why, she has scarcely seen him!” said Mrs. Harding, laughing.

“That’s nothing. Has she talked of him to you?”

“Yes,” she replied after a moment’s thought. “I have seen very little of her to-day; but she spoke of him.”

“Ah! just so. Now, I want to find out if Kharapet has asked her to-day? He was in awful taking yesterday, and swore—no, he is too mealy-mouthed to swear; he declared that he would put himself out of pain one way or the other to-day. Has he, do you think?”

"No, I am almost sure he has not," replied Mrs. Harding reflectively. "He was here, but for a very short time; and just then young Pearson had called with an invitation for Stasie from his mother to go with them to the opera to-morrow. She told me all about it, and is delighted to go. I do not think she could have kept back anything so exciting as a proposal! I am almost sure Mr. Kharapet did not see her alone, or if he did, only for a few minutes."

"Hum! that's as well. It's odd about this old aunt of hers. She was all game for foreign travels, and now she is crying off; I suspect Kharapet is working the oracle in that quarter!"

"How do you mean?" asked his wife.

"I believe he has made Miss Stretton's acquaintance, and has been very favourably received. Now, look here! I have been speaking pretty freely and confidentially to you; don't you go repeat what I have said to Stasie or any one else. I am half afraid of the friendship between you. You just remember your first duty is to *me*."

"I generally do," replied Mrs. Harding drily, her eyes on her work; then suddenly raising

them, and speaking with more decision than usual, she said, "I will help you heartily to keep Kharapet at a distance, but do not count on me in any thing that will pain—or injure Stasie."

"Don't talk like an idiot, for you ain't one! Why should I injure her? What good would it do me? I'm deuced fond of the girl. I tell you if I were free, I'd cut out Kharapet. You're not jealous, are you, Livy?"

This was rather an amiable speech for Mr. Harding.

"Not in the least," returned his wife calmly.

"By George! I believe it would not move you if I had a rival establishment over the way," cried Harding, laughing coarsely.

"Yes! it would move me very much," she said with some emphasis.

"Never fear!" rejoined her husband reassuringly. "I am not given to unnecessary expense."

"I know it."

"All right then. Will you bring me the evening paper; I left it by the window, and I'll see what the last quotations are!"

Soon the rustle of the newspaper dropping

from his hand told Mrs. Harding that her husband was asleep.

She softly laid down her work, and, placing her elbow on the little work-table beside her, looked long and steadily at her slumbering lord, her mild brown eyes darkening and growing deep, with a peculiar expression, a look which perhaps acted magnetically on her sleeper, for he stirred, made some inarticulate sounds, and then half started up wide awake.

"Hey! what is it?" he asked.

"There is nothing the matter," she said quietly.

"I don't know what I was dreaming, but something unpleasant. I suppose Pearson's 'supper champagne' disagreed with me! I'll be off to bed."

He stumbled up and went out of the room.

Mrs. Harding sighed slightly, rose, fetched a book, too large for the ordinary novel, and, placing a couple of wax candles on her table, drew it near a window, sat down to enjoy an hour's deliverance from the present.



## CHAPTER II.

IN spite of her vexations, Stasie's spirits rose as she dressed for the opera. It was so kind of Lady Pearson to think of her! and it was so delicious to go to the opera under any circumstances! She liked young Pearson too. He was bright, boyish, and amusing. But, above all, that afternoon's post had brought her a letter from Bob Matthews, sent ashore with the pilot. Bob wrote in the highest spirits, and, though roughly expressed, full of gratitude. "You have saved me and made me," he concluded, "I'll pay you one day, though I don't yet feel sure when. I think I have a capital berth here. The captain seems a jolly fellow; there are a lot of passengers; we have a fine ship, and a favourable breeze to carry us down Channel. I begin to feel half a sailor already; but the pilot is waiting, so good-bye, and God bless you."



Having read this twice with no small exultation, Stasie struck a match and carefully consumed it. *That* was safely done. With all the executors' authority and indifference to her wishes, she had accomplished something of what she wanted. Bob was now safe away. Messrs. Harding and Kharapet might do what they chose; they could not get back the money. She felt just a little frightened at the idea of the row that would follow the discovery of her misdoings, only enough to give pleasant excitement to the coming conflict; all she really dreaded was to draw Mrs. Harding into a scrape.

"What a life she has! I am sure in her place I should run away! Yet no; not if I were obliged to leave Ethel and Willie behind."

Lady Pearson was not very punctual, and Stasie had been waiting for a few minutes when she drove up.

"I am so stupid not to have thought of asking you to dinner," said Lady Pearson when Stasie had taken her place in the carriage; "I do not know how I omitted to do so; my son has been scolding me ever since."

"Oh! it is no matter," said Stasie; "you are

very kind to think of me at all. I am so delighted to come with you."

"Yes, and *Martha* is such a jolly opera," added young Pearson.

The overture was finished and the curtain up when they reached their places. Stasie was at once absorbed, and became deaf and blind to everything off the stage; so Mr. Pearson found his attempts at even the most fragmentary conversation useless, until the end of the first act released her.

Then the young Lancer tried to make up for lost time, as Stasie was ready enough to talk and full of curiosity respecting the celebrities present.

"Have you never been in London before this season, Miss Verner?" asked Lady Pearson.

"Oh yes; I have always been in London, but not in this region. I lived ever so far away—in Islington."

"In Islington," cried Mr. Pearson with undisguised horror. "Why did they let you stay in such an unknown country?"

"Because I had nowhere else to go," said Stasie cheerfully. "I was very happy there; and I should not mind going back, only the lady who

took care of me when I was little has gone away."

"Very sweet and good of you to say so, my dear, but it would scarcely do for you now," remarked Lady Pearson.

"Why?" returned Stasie, with a slight sigh; then raising her opera glass she scanned the boxes facing her, discovering almost exactly opposite Dr. Brooke, with his friends Mrs. and Miss Marsden and an elderly gentleman. Stasie instantly turned her "Lorgnette" on the stalls, for she thought Brooke's was directed towards the box where she was sitting; then she spoke to Mr. Pearson, who was leaning on the back of her chair, and set him off in full swing by a few questions respecting his regiment. She listened to him with great attention and occasional smiles, thus redeeming her character as a charming girl in his estimation, for in the beginning of the evening he was disposed to think she was not quite so bright and agreeable as he imagined.

Then the drop-scene went up, and Stasie, with a gesture which commanded silence, again devoted herself to the stage.

At the next pause in the performance Stasie

did not attempt to look at the house ; she again settled herself to listen to Mr. Pearson, but he had gone away to get ices, and when he returned he brought Dr. Brooke with him.

Stasie was completely taken at unawares. She instinctively drew back behind the shadow of the curtain beside her, and thought rapidly what a silly goose she was to mind ! Dr. Brooke was nothing to her, even if his manner to-night indicated a return to his old frank cordiality ; a minute more would show, for he was greeting Lady Pearson, and Stasie gathered from what she said that she regretted not having been able to talk more to him at her party, and that she had known him in India just before she had left that country.

Not till all this was said did Brooke turn to Stasie, and observe civilly, yet with the indefinable change of tone which to her was so perceptible, " I did not expect the pleasure of seeing you here, Miss Verner ; and how do you like *Martha* ? "

" Very much, but not so well as *The Trovatore*," she said smiling, as she returned his bow.

He did not seem inclined to offer his hand.

Stasie had time to collect herself and to meet him with exactly the same civil indifference as his own. She had made no mistake ; he evidently wished to mark the terms on which their acquaintance was to exist, and she would show no reluctance in accepting them. It was no small amount of strength in so young a creature that kept Stasie from rushing into a visible flirtation with the gay Lancer ; she only gave quiet but flattering heed to his sometimes silly, sometimes almost witty, talk, through which she heard nearly all Dr. Brooke said. He was very bright and agreeable, and just what he used to be when arguing and chaffing Stasie in their friendly days—little more than a week ago—which seemed to have gone away so far back ; and, while answering some question from Mr. Pearson respecting her summer plans, Stasie heard Lady Pearson ask Dr. Brooke to dine with her the following week.

“I am sorry I cannot,” he said. “I start on Monday for Dieppe with my friends Mr. and Mrs. Marsden ; after spending a few days there I am going on to Switzerland.”

Lady Pearson expressed polite regret ; then Brooke suddenly turned to Stasie, whose pre-

sence he appeared to have forgotten, and said, "I suppose you will soon be starting on *your* travels, Miss Verner?"

"Not so soon as I expected."

"Ah! perhaps you are inclined to change your mind as to the desirability of going abroad, he said, with a look which she did not understand."

"Are you going abroad, Miss Verner?" cried young Pearson. "What a shame! It is ever so much nicer to stay at home. Why don't you go to the Highlands for the summer? My mother and sister are going; it would be so jolly to meet you there."

"Thank you," said Stasie, laughing, "but I intend to go abroad as soon as my aunt is well enough to travel."

"Is Miss Stretton ill?" asked Brooke carelessly. "That is awkward for you; she is your *deus ex machina*."

"I do not understand Latin," returned Stasie quietly. She divined that there was a sting in his words, though she did not exactly know where.

Brooke laughed. "I only mean that she arranges your difficulties for you—does she not?"

"She would if she could," replied Stasie looking at him very straight, with eyes that said as plainly as eyes could, "What do you mean?"

Brooke made no reply either by look or speech, unless a few minutes' thoughtful silence could be considered one. Then he began again to talk with Lady Pearson, and finally, when the curtain again drew up, he took leave, this time distinctly offering his hand to Stasie. "All well at York Gate?" he asked, as he wished her good-night. "I am afraid I cannot call to make my adieux before Sunday."

"Very well, I will tell Mrs. Harding;" and he was gone.

Stasie returned from the opera, feeling stronger and braver. She would not trouble herself about a changeable, fanciful personage like Dr. Brooke. If she had been foolishly eager for his society and conversation she would abjure that weakness; indeed, if he was going away she might probably never see him again, so much the better; *yet* deep in her heart she knew that Dr. Brooke was a man she could have looked up to—at whose feet she could have sat, and loved with faith and

tenderness. But this was not to be, and Stasie told herself that the world was wide enough and full enough to offer many a chance of meeting heroes more heroic than the disdainful doctor.

Still the experience dulled her bright anticipations of a life of enjoyment and acquirement. Now if her pet scheme was defeated she would be cut off from the best means of renovating her mental health and hopefulness.

The day after she had been to the opera decided this question.

Miss Stretton, according to her nature, invariably avoided the necessity of saying "no" directly. She beat about the bush, and if possible *wrote* the obnoxious monosyllable. So the afternoon post brought Stasie the following effusion :—

"MY DEAREST STASIE—It is with infinite regret I proceed to give you an account of my interview with Dr. Grimond. After going most carefully into the case (Dr. G. is remarkable for his great care and deliberation, but is not so well known as he ought to be), he said I was suffering from anorexia with a tendency to asthenia, and that I required to pay great attention to diet, and



complete repose. He *absolutely forbade* me to think of travelling, and advised change of air to some quiet country place.

“I need scarcely tell you, my precious Stasie, that this *terrible sentence* made me quite ill! I had so set my heart on being your companion, so *fondly* hoped to find in you *the object* I have long needed, and now to be separated from you (for I cannot expect you to give up your plans for *me*) is almost more than I can bear! However, the first duty of a Christian is to preserve the life that is *given* to us to cherish for some *ulterior* purpose; and though, *Heaven knows*, mine is a sad and lonely one, I must do my best to preserve it. Therefore, dearest Stasie, I must with bitter tears and an *aching heart* renounce the prospect which for a while cheered the darkness of my future. I trust, dear, you may find some *congenial spirit* who will supply my place. You may, no doubt, find many who are intellectually and even socially my superiors, but none who will love you more truly and warmly than, dearest Stasie, your attached and affectionate aunt,

“CLEMENTINA STRETTON.”

Stasie's first feeling when she had read this moving epistle was a kind of angry sorrow. It was altogether too contrary and vexatious! She was inclined to disbelieve that doctor,—to think there must be some malignant cause at work to cross and defeat her favourite project; but after rereading the letter she was ashamed of the selfishness which underlay her impressions, and resolved to stand by her aunt.

If she was in such bad health,—and the names in the letter were big enough for the most deadly disease,—she wanted some one to take care of and be a daughter to her. And Stasie would fill the rôle, as she felt sure her aunt would devote herself to her (Stasie) under similar circumstances.

Only by affection and disinterestedness could a home be made, and for a “home,” a safe haven of kindness and rest, Stasie yearned in spite of her love of gaiety and admiration, and all that youth delights in.

Of course she took the letter to her friend Mrs. Harding. “Poor thing! she is evidently in great grief at the failure of your pleasant project,” remarked that lady when she had read it. “I am very sorry for you too, Stasie. It would have

been so nice for you to travel with your aunt ; only I am afraid you would have led *her* instead of her leading you."

"And would that matter much ? I am not such a goose after all !"

"No, but you are young and very inexperienced, and so liable to make mistakes. I should be sorry for you to miss your excursion to the Continent, it would do you a world of good. What shall you do ? ask Lady Elizabeth to take you, or look out for another chaperon ?"

"No," returned Stasie slowly, as she folded up her letter and replaced it in its envelope. "No ; I will not run away from poor Aunt Clem, because she cannot be of use to me just in the way I want ; I think I should like to live with her somewhere and nurse her ; perhaps by and by she might be able to travel, and we should be better friends than ever."

"Or find out that you could not endure each other," put in Mrs. Harding quietly. Stasie laughed.

"I like to hear you say those funny ill-natured things," she said. "They come from your head, never from your heart, dear Mrs. Harding."

"Don't be too sure, Stasie;" she stopped a moment and then resumed. "You had better talk to Mr. Harding—he will help you to settle some plan, and Mr. Kharapet—I wonder what has become of him! I have not seen him for some days."

"He was here for a few minutes, you know, just as I was going out on Wednesday," said Stasie mechanically, still looking down at her letter.

"Yes; but I did not see him."

"Well, I must write a line to Aunt Clem at once to assure her I will not leave England without her, just to cheer her a little, and then we can wait and hear what Mr. Harding has to say."

So Stasie hastily despatched a few lines which brought considerable consolation to Miss Stretton, who waited with some trepidation the result of her communication.

It happened that Hormuz Kharapet, who had been himself suffering from an attack of nervous headache, as he told his friend Harding in a note that morning, had ventured as far as Shrewsbury Road, to inquire after his new ally, and

was sitting with Miss Stretton when Stasie's important reply arrived.

"She is, indeed, one in a thousand!" cried Aunt Clem on reading it. "Never can I forget her truth and constancy! She will find me the most faithful of friends; read that, Mr. Khara-pet, and tell me, if I have not reason to be proud of such a niece." The tears stood in her eyes as she handed him the note.

"It is good; it is as it should be," said the Syrian in a low suppressed voice, while he carefully kept his eyes downcast to hide the triumph which he felt glittered there. "Stasie's heart and sound sense show her it would not be well to cast aside such a relation as yourself. We must now reflect how matters can be most comfortably arranged. I am glad I persuaded you to seek medical advice. I feel sure the disturbance, the excitement of foreign travel, would have proved fatal to you. And now! *if* you stand my friend, I do not fear; but, in profoundest confidence, I believe I have an enemy in Mrs. Harding, I know not why. She has, perhaps, an idea that her cousin, a military doctor, who is much at the house, would be a

suitable husband for Stasie, or that Stasie's money would be very useful to him. But, my dear lady, he is a scoffer, a man who believes in nothing, a materialist! and his calling leads him back to India, where your niece would be lost to all her friends! How could we trust her to a man of this description! Alas, the lives of too many Englishmen in those regions are a disgrace to their faith and nation."

"You horrify me! Mr. Kharapet," exclaimed Miss Stretton. "Mrs. Harding ought not to introduce Miss Verner to such a character!"

"Pray, do not mistake me," cried Kharapet; "I *know* nothing positive against Dr. Brooke, save his opinions. I only mention what I have known of others, and he has evidently no Christian principle to restrain him. Then his connection with India; the probability of his taking his wife there is a serious objection."

"But you, Mr. Kharapet!" said Miss Stretton, shrewdly enough, "were you to marry Stasie, would you not take her either there or to Mardin?"

"No! dear madam, certainly not; my wish, my ambition is to dwell in England—in London

or its neighbourhood. Business might oblige me to visit the East for a short time, but my home should be here. Here I have friends, patrons—kind and powerful patrons. My earnest faith, my attachment to all things British and enlightened, cuts me off in a great measure from my own compatriots. In England I hope to live and die, and, need I add that my idea of home is associated with yourself, either as an inmate or a near neighbour?”

“You are very good, I am sure,” returned Miss Stretton, with a grateful and well-pleased smile. “I am as anxious as you can be for your success. Nor shall you have to complain of any indifference on my part to your interest. I earnestly hope that dear child will see which way her true happiness lies; but should she take up other ideas, why, I must humour her you know.”

“I only ask you to do your best for me, dear lady; we must be patient, patient and persevering. When do you say you saw Stasie last?”

“The day before yesterday, rather late in the afternoon. She had been detained by visitors, and looked pale and tired after Lady Pearson’s party.”

Kharapet passed his hand slowly over his mouth, and stroked his long moustaches, while he fixed his eyes on the carpet. Stasie had kept her promise then! And as she had been with her aunt so soon after the excitement of his proposal, and her rejection of it, the temptation of confiding all to her only relative would have just then been strongest! If she would but guard the secret, and could be kept within the range of his influence, all might yet be well.

He raged within himself at his own imprudence and impatience in trying to pluck the fruit which was not yet ready to fall into his hands; but he was more than ever resolved that it should be his, sooner or later. Wealth, and beauty, and love—at any rate the two first.

When he roused himself from his meditation Miss Stretton was speaking in a mild lady-like manner of the evils arising from want of mental humility and the presumption of those who turned from the light of revelation to the errors of reason. “I fear our dear Stasie has not been brought up with that amount of Christian discipline which might have been expected in the family of a well-known missionary.”



"It is true," said Kharapet with an air of profound conviction, but not quite knowing what she was talking about. "You will be of infinite use to her. Now I must bid you adieu for the present. To-morrow I hope to feel better, and equal to go into the city, where Mr. Harding (without whose co-operation I can do nothing) and myself will devise some plan for the future which will satisfy you and Stasie."

And Kharapet, with one of his deep deferential bows, took his leave.

"Well, Stasie must have a harder heart than I thought, if she can resist so charming, and handsome, and Christian a man as that!" soliloquised Miss Stretton, looking after Kharapet, as she prepared to mount to her elevated chamber from the back parlour, which was her hall of audience. "I am sure his manners would grace a court, and his gentleness and consideration might put many of our fine gentlemen to the blush. I do hate roughness! Then the way he appreciates *me* is quite remarkable; he sees I am something out of the common, and treats me accordingly. I do hope they will come to some decision soon, for the discomfort of this

house, and the steepness of the stair, is perfectly exhausting.

That evening after dinner, when the servants had left the room, Stasie produced her letter. "Read that, Mr. Harding," she said, handing it to him with a curious feeling of defeat.

Mr. Harding turned it over, glanced at the signature, exclaimed, "Ha!" and read it through with provoking slowness; then he looked up, but instead of speaking at once on the topic which concerned her, he further provoked Stasie by remarking: "There are very few people, especially women, who can write a good letter; just see how this aunt of yours beats about the bush; she could have said her say in about a dozen words. 'The Doctor forbids me to travel; I am very sorry, but it can't be helped,' and here are four sides of notepaper filled with repetition."

"Oh! don't mind being critical," cried Stasie impatiently. "The letter pleases *me*, and I want to talk about what we had better do now."

"Hum, it is a very serious consideration. What are your own ideas, Stasie; should you

like to find some other old lady to travel with?"

"No, thank you, I should prefer remaining with my aunt. Might we not take a house and live together somewhere?"

"Yes, that might be arranged," returned Mr. Harding thoughtfully.

"And after a few months Aunt Clem might be well enough to go abroad," cried Stasie, elated to find that her proposition was not opposed.

"Just so," said Mr. Harding still reflecting. "Look here, Stasie, I have a nicish house and garden down at Sefton Park that might suit you for a few months. It isn't furnished, but I could easily put in some, and I wouldn't be a greedy landlord. How would that do for the rest of the summer and autumn?"

"I think it would be delightful," cried Stasie with sparkling eyes. "Quite near Mrs. Harding and—and *you*," suggested a prudent afterthought.

"Yes, I fancy it might answer very well—at any rate, till you see how this aunt of yours goes on. She seems a shaky kind of a spinster."

"She is a dear kind soul," cried Stasie, "and you will please speak of her respectfully!"

"Ay! to be sure, whatever you like. But about the house—you had better go down and see it before you make up your mind."

"Yes! you must look at the place first," said Mrs. Harding, who seldom joined in any conversation between Stasie and her husband. "I think you would like it for the summer, at any rate, and it would be a great pleasure to me to have you near."

"Let us go and see it by all means, and as soon as possible," returned Stasie. "I should be so pleased to be in a house of my own."

"Ay! and I dare say *you* will be mistress of your own house," said Mr. Harding admiringly. "Well, can't you and Mrs. Harding go down and look at it on Monday? Make up your mind; I'll give the necessary orders on Tuesday, and in a fortnight all will be ready for you."

"I think we ought to ask Miss Stretton to come with us," observed Mrs. Harding.

"Do that as you like!" said her husband indifferently.

"May I ask her to luncheon on Sunday—my birthday? or rather will you, Mrs. Harding? I know she does not like being out late. She is

afraid of all sorts of things." Mrs. Harding hesitated, and looked at her husband.

"Yes, yes," said he hastily; "ask her by all means. I shall have an opportunity of speaking to her on several matters, and it will be a very good plan."

"Thank you!" cried Stasie, beaming all over. "You are very good really, Mr. Harding!"

"What! as good as Kharapet?" he asked laughing.

"Oh, yes; quite as good, even better for suggesting such a nice plan."

"We'll see how it will answer. By the way, you must ask Wyatt's leave, you know; go and call on Lady Elizabeth, and tell her all about it, and then write to him."

"Let us go to-morrow—that is, if I ought to go with you," said Mrs. Harding.

"Of course you ought. I had much rather you did."

"Yes; there is no reason why you should not," was the fiat of the domestic Jove.

"Then we will have a brougham to-morrow, call on Lady Elizabeth, go on afterwards to see Miss Stretton, and ask her to luncheon on Sunday."

"Pray, how many times have you hired a brougham this season?" asked Harding.

"Not oftener than was necessary, and never without your knowledge."

"Saturday is Lady Elizabeth's day; we shall be sure to find her," said Stasie, disregarding this question and answer. Stasie had not felt so happy and satisfied since the days when she used to enjoy Dr. Brooke's visits, and looked forward to the delights of visiting famous places. After all, her original plans were only postponed. A summer in a nice, sweet country place would quite restore Aunt Clem. She might even have Mrs. Matthews to pay her a visit, which would be quite delightful. In short, she built a gigantic castle before she slept, which she filled with a large number of guests. Even Miss Amelia Boaden, who had been her mortal enemy for two whole years, was to be invited; and Kharapet! well, Kharapet was very foolish to have thought about her in the way he did. She felt a little ashamed of herself for shrinking from him with a sort of repulsion; but he was sensible, and would get over his nonsense, and see it was altogether out of the question and unbecoming. She did

not want to be ill-natured to Kharapet if he were content to be friendly,—and so sleep stole over her softly like a caress, her last thought being a dim conjecture why she had no letter lately from Ella Matthews.

The next day after luncheon Mrs. Harding started with Stasie to pay their intended visits.

Lady Elizabeth was at home, and surrounded by a number of visitors more or less remarkable.

She was very amiable, but exceedingly occupied, and Stasie with difficulty managed a moment's private talk, in which to tell her the arrangement suggested by Mr. Harding.

Lady Elizabeth highly approved. "A most excellent idea, my dear Miss Verner—nothing could be better! Mr. Wyatt and myself are going to visit Dalmatia, and perhaps Montenegro, as soon as the session is over. There is much that requires ventilation in those districts. So I am afraid my scheme of taking you with us to Rome is out of the question. It will be very nice for you to be near that charming little Mrs. Harding, and a great relief to Mr. Wyatt to know you are so well looked after. Is there any one here you would like to be introduced to? There

is Paradoski, a most remarkable Pole. He has invented—— But,” interrupting herself—“then he only speaks German and Latin besides his own language, and you may not be fluent in either.”

“Indeed I am not,” said Stasie, laughing.

“Well then, there is Mrs. Daredeville, the celebrated emancipation woman, just returned from America.”

“Pray, Lady Elizabeth, allow *me* to remind Miss Verner of my existence,” said Lord Cecil Annesley, extricating himself from a group where he had been entangled.

Stasie was very well pleased to talk with the agreeable, easy-going *ci-devant jeune homme*, who begged to be presented to Mrs. Harding; and after a little conversation and some inquiries on Lord Cecil’s part as to her change of plans, they caught Lady Elizabeth’s attention to say adieu. It was a long time before Stasie saw her again.

Miss Stretton had just gone out for a little walk,—so the maid who opened the door informed Mrs. Harding when they reached her abode,—and was a good deal better.



Mrs. Harding, therefore, left her card, and a little note of invitation with which she had provided herself, and drove away home, where Stasie was occupied till dinner in composing a letter to her guardian, which Mr. Harding touched up a little, and then pronounced quite the right thing.





### CHAPTER III.

SUNDAY was a dull oppressive day, the atmosphere thick with a continuous drizzle, the pavements coated with greasy mud, and the aspect of things in general depressing.

Miss Stretton arrived a little before luncheon time, wrapped in a waterproof cloak as dingy as the day, her feathers all uncurled, the graceful length of her best dress so brailed up as to reveal indiarubber overshoes of surprising magnitude, which covered her boots. Stasie, who had been on the look-out, ran down-stairs to meet and assist her. She conducted her aunt to her own room, and there the unmistakable traces of transit per omnibus on a bad day were effaced, and Miss Stretton enabled to adjust an elegant fabric of lace and rose-coloured ribbon which adorned her head and softened or hid the ruder touches of time.

"Are you sure, love, that my cap is straight? I am very anxious to produce a good impression on Mr. Harding, for I can see *he* is the person to be propitiated."

"Yes, auntie, it is all right; you look very nice, and we had better go down to the drawing-room. Mr. Harding is sometimes funny and suspicious. He might think I was putting you up to something, or you me."

"You do not say so! Let us go by all means," replied Miss Stretton eagerly.

Stasie was touched by the nervous anxiety of the poor lady. It was evident she had much at stake, and while thus moved, she observed with pleasure that her aunt was a very ladylike presentable person.

The Harding family were all assembled in the drawing-room, and, to Stasie's confusion, their number was augmented by Kharapet, who was dividing some sweetmeats among the children. He looked ill and shrunk, Stasie thought, and her heart reproached her for the kind of unavowed disgust with which she had thought of his voice and look and gesture whenever she recalled the uncomfortable moment when he had avowed his

passion for her. Why should she feel thus towards a man whose only fault was being too fond of her?

Mrs. Harding rose to receive Miss Stretton kindly and graciously. Mr. Harding, who was looking out of the window and grumbling at the weather, turned quickly, and on being introduced by his wife, greeted his guest with his best air of frank *bonhommie*.

"Very glad to see you, Miss Stretton; this troublesome girl has talked no end about you! You have a bad day. Hope you are none the worse of coming out?"

While Kharapet met her with much *empressement*, all of which Miss Stretton accepted as gracefully as her nervousness would permit, Stasie, with a degree of composure which belied her inward condition, went straight to Kharapet and bade him good-day.

He bowed low, and took her offered hand in silence, held it loosely for half a second, and spoke a few words in a constrained voice. Then he stood back with a subdued air, which had a double effect on Stasie—it moved her to pity and an inclination to laugh—fatal combination for a lover's hopes.

Miss Stretton went off into raptures over the children. She was really fond of children theoretically, never having much to do with them, and, being conscious that this tendency was praiseworthy and popular, made the most of it; while the little monkeys, like nearly all creatures who are aware of being courted, were cool, cautious, and distant with their worshipper.

"Come here, you little darling," she exclaimed to Willie; "come and sit on my lap." She lifted him up, he neither yielding nor resisting, but making himself heavy, after the manner of children whose views respecting their admirers are undecided.

"He is a poor little chap," said Mr. Harding, more contemptuously than sympathetically. He was a sort of man who thought a delicate child a reproach, and somehow failing in duty to his parents. "He has given his mother no end of trouble."

"And no end of pleasure too," said Mrs. Harding, stroking his dark curls tenderly.

"Here is a sturdy fellow," continued Mr. Harding, drawing Johnnie forward. "This is my boy."

“And a very fine one, I am sure,” cried Miss Stretton with elaborate admiration, though she hugged up Willie at the same time. “He is your living image, Mr. Harding. How old is he, may I ask? Not quite ten! You don’t say so! I should certainly have taken him for twelve or thirteen,” etc. etc.

While the rest were thus grouped round Miss Stretton, Kharapet found an opportunity to say almost in a whisper to Stasie—

“Will you forgive my haste and imprudence? I see now I was to blame; will you forget it, and let me be once more your true, your devoted friend?”

“Oh yes, yes!” said Stasie in the same tone; “I should be very glad, for you have been always good to me.”

“And it will rest ever a secret between ourselves only?” This with some eagerness.

“Certainly, you may trust me.”

“There goes the bell,” cried Mr. Harding in a loud and joyous voice. “There is nothing to be done on such a day as this but to eat and drink.” He offered his arm to Miss Stretton as he spoke, and Kharapet, after a moment’s hesitation, pre-

sented his to Mrs. Harding, Stasie and the children bringing up the rear.

Luncheon on Sundays at York Gate was early dinner, at least for all the family save the master, who generally had a small feast all by himself at seven o'clock.

So the table was handsomely spread, and Miss Stretton was visibly cheered by the politeness of her host and the sight of the good things before her. She had been warned by her medical adviser to avoid this or that, she said, but on the present happy occasion she would relax the rigidity of her *régime* and enjoy herself.

Mr. Harding was unusually hospitable and pressing, yet frequent sharp words to the servants and rough rebukes to the children showed his wife and Stasie that all was not serene.

As soon as the meal was over and the children had said grace, Mr. Harding exclaimed, "Now run away, youngsters. I suppose there is nurse or some one at home to look after them?"—this to his wife. "*All* the servants don't go out on a Sunday, I suppose? It is a preposterous notion this right of servants to go out. By George! we would not stand such rubbish in the

East, eh, Kharapet ?—and you call this a civilised country.”

“Poor things! they must want to go out and see their friends as much as we do,” ejaculated Stasie.

“There, be off with you,” continued Mr. Harding to the children, not heeding her.

“Won’t you come, Stasie ?” said Ethel, pausing beside her.

“Yes, do come with *me*, Stasie,” cried John, taking hold of her arm.

“Go this moment,” cried his father.

And the children ran off.

“Ah,” said Mr. Harding, exulting, “the young scamp knows a pretty girl when he sees one already. Now then, take a little more claret-cup, Miss Stretton, and let us talk over matters. I daresay Stasie has told you my idea——”

“No,” interrupted Stasie. “I have not seen my aunt since you told me.”

“Ah, well then, Miss Verner has wisely given up her whim about travelling on the Continent as you cannot go with her, and I propose that you should set up housekeeping together, and I will let you one of my houses at Sefton Park for four or five months,” etc. etc. etc.



And Mr. Harding went fully into the scheme, Miss Stretton coming in, in the treble, with ejaculations of, "I am sure nothing could be better," "most admirable!" "so far as I am concerned, I perfectly approve," and so on, her face lighting up as he proceeded.

Then Stasie expressed her satisfaction ; Kharapet, with an air of melancholy acquiescence, stated that he saw no objection ; and Mrs. Harding observed how pleased she should be to have Stasie and her aunt for neighbours, at any rate during the summer. All went well. Even the question of finance was got over without great wrangling or difficulty. Mr. Harding proposed that all bills, etc., should be sent in to him for payment. But Stasie, having seen something of the working of his domestic system, stoutly resisted this suggestion, and to her surprise found, though he said little, that Kharapet was on her side. So a temporary arrangement was agreed to. Miss Stretton was to have a monthly sum for housekeeping, and all outgoings, such as wages, rent, etc., were to be paid by the executors.

Having arrived at this amicable conclusion,

Mrs. Harding rose from table and, followed by the rest of the party, went upstairs.

So soon as she reached the drawing-room she went to her own little work-table, and took out a small, delicately-embroidered sachet, which she slipped, as she thought, unperceived into Stasie's hand, saying, "A little memento for to-day, Stasie."

"Oh, thank you, dear Mrs. Harding. It is so good of you to have worked it yourself. I did not think it was for me when I saw you doing it, and," opening it, "what a love of a lace cravatte! You really are too kind. You know how fond I am of lace."

"What's all this?" asked Mr. Harding, attracted by Stasie's exclamation.

"Not much," returned his wife; "only a trifle I worked for Stasie as it is her birthday."

"Hey! I never remember these things," said Mr. Harding contemptuously. "All these kind of gifts and ceremonies are bosh, but I wish you many happy returns of the day all the same, Stasie. You haven't a heartier well-wisher than myself," and he shook hands with her. "Why didn't you remind me it was your birthday, and we should have had a bottle of champagne?"

"I really did not think of it myself," said Stasie, smiling; "and I am sure I have your good wishes, which is quite enough without either gifts or champagne."

"I am so vexed, dearest child, I did not know it was your natal day," exclaimed Miss Stretton, who was established in a luxurious easy-chair, and beaming with delight at the prospect opening before her, "or, poor though I am, I should have brought you some small offering of affection."

"It is not at all necessary, dear auntie! Besides, have you not given me yourself to-day?"

"I have indeed, you dear, sweet thing," exclaimed Miss Stretton much affected.

Mr. Harding, his hands in his trousers' pockets, looked on with an expression of wondering, careless curiosity; and all seemed as serene and sunny as if the summer weather, which ought to have been shining out of doors, had concentrated itself within, when Kharapet, who had kept a little aloof near one of the windows, came forward to introduce (most unconsciously) a charge of dynamite into the amicable group. "I was aware of the occasion," he said gently, "and con-

sidering myself, through my late brother, your nearest connection, and by my own choice your sincerest friend, I ventured to bring a little token in remembrance of the day." He drew from an inner pocket a small case, and opening it displayed a very handsome ring of large opals and small diamonds.

Stasie flushed up to the roots of her hair. She was infinitely annoyed ; she saw at a glance that it was impossible to refuse, nor did she recognise anything but renunciation of his former pretensions in the little speech with which he had presented his gift. Yet she did not want to be encumbered with any obligation ; there was something instinctively antagonistic to him in her impulses,—on the crest of every wave of thought that stirred her brain. Ever since she began to perceive the true nature of his feeling towards her, she had been constantly compelled to run through a little chain of reasoning before she could bring herself into an amiable state of mind towards him. Still it was impossible to refuse, and if she accepted, she must accept graciously. She therefore constrained herself to take the ring with a smile and a few

kindly words; but she quickly put it on her finger herself to avoid the giver's touch. Still flushed and uncomfortable, she tried to hide her embarrassment by showing it to Mrs. Harding and Aunt Clem. The latter broke into admiring exclamations, and Mr. Harding, thinking to himself, "He is bidding high for her, and biding his time!" took out his double eye-glass, which he used on very critical occasions, to scan the stones. "They are not bad," he said gravely. "Give me the ring, Stasie. Ah!" taking it, "they *are* set transparent."

"They are the best I could get," said Kharapet with a quick flash of his dark eyes towards his colleague.

"No doubt, no doubt," returned Harding, in a disparaging tone, "but they are not to be compared to the stones in that biggest ring of those that came from Mardin."

"I don't remember," said Kharapet sullenly.

"Let us look at them both together," cried Mr. Harding, still holding the object of his criticism. "Go, like a good girl, Stasie, bring us the other ring!"

Stasie hesitated; the ring was among the

things she had pledged for Bob's benefit. She was quite ready to disclose that transaction now that Bob was out of reach; but on *this* day, when every one was happy and kind she would rather not vex either Mr. Harding or Kharapet; however, she felt she had no choice, and even while these thoughts flashed through her brain, she nerved herself to meet the inevitable. "I am afraid I cannot show it to you. I haven't it at present," she said.

A blank expression of utter surprise changed Mr. Harding's self-satisfied aspect.

Kharapet raised his head with a look of keen, almost fierce, expectation.

"Why, what the devil have you done with it?" exclaimed the former.

"It is my own! I suppose I may do what I like with it," she replied, roused by his tone.

"No! you may not! You are under age; you are under tutelage, an infant in the eye of the law."

"The box, Stasie!" said Kharapet in a deep tragic whisper of concentrated feeling. "The box; bring down the box."

Stasie turned, paused, looked at him, then with

a slight scornful laugh, exclaimed, "One might think a life was at stake," and left the room.

"I don't like this at all," said Mr. Harding angrily. "That girl has been up to some blank, blank mischief. Do you know anything about it?" to his wife with fierce emphasis.

"Nothing whatever," she returned, growing a little pale. "But I am sure you will find nothing wrong; Stasie is incapable——"

"Don't tell me," interrupted Harding, "you'd swear black was white for each other; there will be no getting at the truth between you both, with your ridiculous friendship! and you, ma'am," pouncing on Miss Stretton with a suddenness that made her jump, "what do *you* know about this business?"

"Nothing, I give you my solemn word," cried poor Aunt Clem, appalled. "And, like Mrs. Harding, I have every confidence in my dear niece."

"I have no confidence in any girl living," growled Harding.

Kharapet said nothing, but stared fixedly at the door by which Stasie had gone out.

"I'll get to the bottom of this, by George!"

cried Mr. Harding. "I foresee that girl will give us a heap of trouble. She is——"

What, did not appear, for at that moment Jane, the accomplished parlour-maid, threw the door wide open, and announced in her clearest accents, "Dr. Brooke."

Whereupon enter the visitor, cool, collected, well dressed, and perfectly unconscious of the whirlpool of anger, suspicion, and fear into which he was launching himself.

Mrs. Harding stood up to receive him with the sense of relief and protection his presence always brought.

Mr. Harding was too preoccupied to give him more than a gruff greeting. Kharapet's smooth civility was not to be ruffled by any ordinary test, and Miss Stretton, by an effort, assumed her usual air of well-bred attention.

Brooke himself was immediately aware that there was a storm brewing, and felt curious, but determined to stay on if possible, in case he might be of use to his cousin.

"Miserable day," said he, drawing a chair near Mrs. Harding; "I felt pretty sure to find you at home. How are the children?"



He looked at her as he spoke, and saw that she was anxious, or in some way disturbed.

“They are all well,” she returned.

Her further speech was cut short by the entrance of Stasie, her jewel-box under her arm, and a look of resolution in her face. The sight of the new arrival, however, checked and chilled her. She did not want Brooke as a witness of the quarrel she felt imminent, yet she knew not how to escape it.

While she paused he came forward to greet her, with what in her own mind she termed his new manner.

“That’s right,” cried Mr. Harding, reassured for a moment by her speedy return. “You have got them all there?”

“I have the *box*, and you can look at it,” said Stasie, standing at bay.

“What is the matter?” asked Brooke in an undertone.

“I scarcely know,” returned Mrs. Harding; “I believe Stasie has given away one of her rings, and they are angry.”

“Ought I to go?”

“No, no,” she whispered; “don’t go.”

Meantime Mr. Harding, with some little difficulty, had put the clumsy key into the lock and opened the case ; for an instant he was silent, and then uttered an exclamation of dismay. "Look here, Kharapet. Here's a pretty business."

Kharapet came swiftly to his side and saw the top tray empty of all but the white wool in which the jewels used to nestle ; over this lay scattered several small oblong cards of different colours, with names and addresses and also numbers, etc. Kharapet, gazing with dilated horrified eyes, stood silent.

"Where," exclaimed Mr. Harding, who seemed for the moment paralysed, "where are they?" A pause. Stasie, gathering up her forces, did not reply, but looked straight and rather defiantly at both executors. "Where," repeated Mr. Harding, collecting himself, "what have you done with the things that were here ? and, good God !" lifting the first tray, "there isn't a thing left but two brooches, a clasp, and the gold set. What the deuce have you done with them ? and these pawn tickets—why, what the devil, there is something d—d disgraceful and mysterious under this ! I'll get to the bottom of it !"

Kharapet said nothing. He sought with eager trembling fingers through the cotton wool; his earnest alarmed look would have seemed almost ludicrous to Stasie had she not been so horribly mortified by the presence of Dr. Brooke. It could not be avoided, so she rushed to the encounter without giving herself time to think.

"There will be no difficulty in getting to the bottom of it," she said coolly, though she felt her mouth dry; "I am going to tell you the whole story." She sat down as she spoke on the sofa, near which she stood, and went on, her eyes fixed unflinchingly on Mr. Harding. "You know how you and Hormuz refused me, when I begged for some money to give Mrs. Mathews. No, not to give her—to *repay* her; for she has never been half paid for all her care of me—all she provided for me!"

"By George, I see it all," cried Mr. Harding, who was getting very angry.

"No, you do not," returned Stasie. "Just listen. A week after—I think it was a week—Bob Mathews came to see me, don't you remember?" turning suddenly to Brooke—she felt an odd desire to drag him in, to transform him from

a judicial spectator to an actor in the scene—"you were here when he came?"

"Yes, I remember," he replied, drawing his chair a little forward.

"He told me he was in great trouble. I did not mind at first, for he generally *is* in trouble. However, he went on and described how he had an appointment as surgeon on board a ship going ever so far off, but he had debts, and his creditors would stop him and put him in prison. Now I knew this would be ruin to him, and just throw him on his mother's hands altogether. I saw he was in earnest, and I was at my wits' end to help him. But there was no use in asking you, and as he wanted forty pounds I could not take it out of my allowance, so I thought of the jewels, but I told Bob I did not like to sell them. Then he said I need not, for there were people that would lend money for them, and give them back when you paid it."

Kharapet groaned audibly, and cried in a piteous voice, "When you pay it, and twenty per cent besides."

Stasie gave him a quick glance and went on. "I was very glad to hear it, and I took

nearly all, as you see, and went to meet Bob. We went into several places in the Strand, and got the money he wanted and a little more. Coming out of the last, we ran against Dr. Brooke—you remember, don't you ?—and that's all."

"All!" cried Mr. Harding, "and quite enough. Don't you see what a blank blank piece of folly and imprudence you have been guilty of! a downright disreputable action, by George! Stealing away with your jewels, like a—like a—common thief, to give them to a sneaking scamp of a rascally medical student, who has, I suppose, bamboozled you into promising to marry him! I never heard of a more shamefully deceitful trick. I'll lock you up, by——. I'll report you to your guardian. I'll——"

"How dare you talk such nonsense?" interrupted Stasie, starting up, and roused to the wildest indignation. "Promise to marry Bob Mathews! a poor fellow who has not the strength to keep himself straight; who lets himself down to beg help of *me*! who cannot even dress nicely. You little know me, Mr. Harding. I helped him out of pity, because he was his mother's son, and

I believe he will do well yet ; but to think that I could be in love with a boy that is like a tiresome brother ! ” She broke off and laughed scornfully.

Kharapet had paused in his examination of the box, and stood slightly bent with the pawn-tickets in one hand, his face lividly, greenly pale, gazing intently at Stasie, but as she spoke, his countenance relaxed.

“ That’s right ; brazen it out—brazen it out,” exclaimed Mr. Harding, not a little startled and checked by Stasie’s spirit ; for like most tyrants he had a strain of cowardice under his bluster. “ But you’ll not throw dust in *my* eyes. Now I must insist on your giving me this young man’s address. You may as well, for a detective will soon discover him.”

“ I will give you his address with pleasure,” returned Stasie. “ Robert Mathews, surgeon on board the *Queen of the Isles*, now on her voyage to Shanghai.”

“ By George ! He is off there ? ” Mr. Harding stopped, as if under the influence of feelings too deep for words, and Kharapet’s voice filled up the pause, adding up in a melancholy

undertone, "fifteen, seven ten—five—twenty, five ten—fifty-three——"

"It is as bold and—and disreputable a—a—dodge as ever I heard of," said Mr. Harding, furious at being checked and defied, while he walked up and down—a certain sign of great disturbance—and scarcely able to express himself. "I'll—I'll have that young rascal arrested as soon as the ship is in port, I'll be d—d if I do not. I'll wring the money out of him or his cursed psalm-singing old humbug of a mother."

"You shall not speak of Mrs. Mathews like that," cried Stasie, "or I shall go straight away to my guardian and tell him how you speak to me. *He* at least is a gentleman, and would not use such words."

"Don't you see yourself how disgracefully you have acted," resumed Mr. Harding more mildly, and beginning to perceive that he must not go too far. "I appeal to any one if Kharapet and myself have not just cause to be angry, trusting you with property, as we legally had no right to do, and then to see it flung in the gutter, as one might say."

"Why, what have I done?" asked Stasie.

“Taken my own things and lent them to a friend. I haven’t robbed you! Do you think I have been so wrong and shameful?” turning to Mrs. Harding; then a thought suddenly struck her, for she went on quickly, “Yes, yes, you are strict; you will be vexed with me, that is the reason I did not say anything about it to you. But *you*, Aunt Clem, do *you* think me so very base and bad?”

It was a crucial moment for Miss Stretton. She was really frightened by Mr. Harding, but her sympathy and affection went with Stasie. And Aunt Clem had a heart, though a good deal frayed out, and she let herself be moved by its promptings.

“Indeed I do not, Stasie,” she said. “You were imprudent, my dear; you should have taken counsel with your kind friend Mr. Harding, and he would have perhaps yielded to your persuasion, or with *me*, and I should never have allowed you to go alone to the Strand with this objectionable young man; but I love you all the more for your generous thoughtlessness. Pray allow me to be a mediator,” she continued, with her best air to Mr. Harding. “I am sure



our dear Stasie has no better friends than yourself and Mr. Kharapet; only to men of your intellect and business habits these little feminine weaknesses must seem silly indeed"—an ingratiating simper.

"Silliness is no word for it," said Mr. Harding, still walking up and down, and frowning portentously.

Stasie gave her aunt a nod and smile, and feeling a terrible tendency to burst out crying, put on a braver front, "Yes," she cried, "I know they are very good to me, and I shall forgive Mr. Harding his rude words; but if any of you think I am sorry for what I have done you are quite mistaken."

"There is a speech for you," cried Mr. Harding, stopping short. "How are we to trust you with anything when you make such a—a—statement. Gad! you will never be safe out of our sight. I shall retract my consent to your residing with Miss Stretton, there! she would let you blow your brains out if you fancied it. I'll——"

"Do not be hasty," interrupted Kharapet. "Do not be hasty, my good friend. I am sure

Stasie will on reflection regret the pain she has given us ;” he sighed, as if from the bottom of his heart ; “ but do not be too severe. We must try——”

“ By George ! you *are* going in for it,” interrupted Mr. Harding with a sneer. “ But I will appeal to any one,” he looked fiercely at his wife, who kept profound silence, though her colour varied, “ if there ever was a more audacious, disgraceful trick played. I ask *you*, Dr. Brooke.”

“ Pray don’t,” cried Stasie haughtily. “ It is too bad to have offended a stranger with such a scene, and as he is not concerned in it in any way, why trouble him for an opinion ?”

“ Oh, I have had enough of fine speeches and balderdash,” said Mr. Harding with brutal sulkiness. “ I’ll go off to Williams : it’s such a blank nasty day I daresay he will be at home, and see what’s best to be done ;” so saying he took a bunch of keys from his trouser’s pocket with one hand, and seized on the jewel-box with the other.

Stasie did not make the slightest resistance. She gave one steady stare of intense disdain, then, in tones that faltered in the last words said,

"Very well, take it, and this day three years I will claim it, and the last fraction that belongs to me." She turned away and walked towards the door.

Dr. Brooke started up and opened it for her, distancing Kharapet, who made for the same goal, saying in a half whisper, "I will go with him, Stasie, I will restrain him."

Brooke held out his hand, "Good-bye, Miss Verner," he said. "I hope to have the pleasure of seeing you on my return." But Stasie did not reply. She gave him her hand for an instant, not daring to trust her voice, and ran away to her room.

A moment's dead silence ensued, then Mr. Harding exclaimed, "The care of such a girl is enough to turn a saint into a devil. By George! I wish we had some Eastern customs in force here. I will bid you good-morning, doctor;" to his wife roughly, "See you don't encourage any of this pernicious rubbish. Let that obstinate minx mope if she likes."

Here Miss Stretton rose and very quietly left the room. Mr. Harding looked after her grimly, and then with a nod to Brooke went out.

“One moment,” exclaimed Kharapet. “I will come with you.” He made hasty but ceremonious adieux to Mrs. Harding and Brooke, and walked swiftly away, closing the door after him.





## CHAPTER IV.

WHEN Brooke, who had observed this scene with deep interest and vivid curiosity, was left alone with his cousin, he was surprised to see her cover her eyes with one hand, while her lips quivered as though she were struggling with strong emotion. Before he could frame a question as to her mood, however, she looked up, and he saw that the tears hung on her lashes.

"I am such a shameful coward," she said, in an unsteady voice. "You cannot think how degraded I feel in my own eyes."

"Why?" asked Brooke, drawing his chair nearer to her. "I am not aware that you have done anything heinous."

"No; that is just it. I have been false and cowardly by my silence. Did you not perceive how Stasie appealed to me, and then with generous tact released me from the necessity of

a reply? She knows, Jim—none so well—the truth of my weakness, of my circumstances, and she spared me.”

“My dear Livy, you surely exaggerate. There is nothing false about *you*. You mean you did not like to contradict Harding. You were right on the whole—it is ill talking with an angry man.”

“Perhaps; and I should have done Stasie little or no good. Nevertheless, I *was* false to her!—it is always better to speak the truth; and she is so brave herself she will despise me; yet she will not change, even though she cannot respect me.”

“Don’t take matters so seriously,” said Brooke. “Miss Verner must not measure every one by herself. She has an unusual amount of pluck and——”

“She has no one to fear,” put in Mrs. Harding.

“I hope you are free from so unpleasant an incubus?”

“I am *never* free from fear,” exclaimed Mrs. Harding, who was evidently excited and off her guard. “You are too observant, too keen, not

to have seen it, but you cannot know all the degradation of such a state. You heard how roughly, how brutally Mr. Harding spoke to Stasie. You see how innocent of all evil, how natural and generous her conduct has been throughout. It was my duty to have restrained him, to have defended her, and yet I dared not. When she turned to me I could not, dared not, speak, and she understood it. Did you see how quickly she released me from the 'question' which was indeed the rack to me. Why, even poor Miss Stretton, whom I somehow look upon as weaker and sillier than myself, *she* stood by Stasie better than I did;" and Mrs. Harding's tremulous hands played nervously with the fringe of the arm-chair in which she sat.

Brooke looked at her with infinite grave sympathy.

"Harding *was* rough—indeed I might use a stronger word. Perhaps, Livy, if you had had courage enough to hold your own, to face him, it would be better for him as well as for yourself."

"Of course it would," she returned, resting her cheek on her hand. "But how was I to know that? When I married I never dreamed

of a possible struggle with my husband. I only thought of making him happy, of pleasing—or if we differed, to speak gently and reasonably to win him, to persuade ; and so I lost my chance. Had I been a woman of stronger, coarser fibre, it would have been better for me, better far for him. Now he has brought me *down*. I am under his feet. I would do any meanness for peace, I dread him so. Yet it is not so miserable as it was—there is nothing more to know, nothing more to discover. I lost all force and all hope in losing self-respect ; and were I burning with indignation, quivering under the cruel cutting speeches he makes, I yet could not, dare not, show it, he is so strong and so unscrupulous ;” she shuddered.

“ Good heavens !” cried Brooke. “ I guessed a good deal, but nothing like this. What is to be done ? Can you find no pretext for separating from him ?”

Mrs. Harding laughed a low mocking laugh. “ Mr. Harding is an irreproachable husband in the eye of the law. He gives me a good house to live in, clothes to wear, plenty to eat. He is on the whole an affectionate father, except when



very angry ; he occasionally tells me I am a fool, and a weak treacherous idiot, and a worthless weight, who does not contribute a sixpence to the housekeeping—all this, with many expressions I could hardly repeat ; *but*, he does not beat me, he does not deprive me of the necessaries of life, he does not put me out of doors, and I am powerless : *no* one can give me any redress.”

“ Ah, Livy,” cried Brooke, carried away by his deep compassion, and feeling that she was too absorbed in her own sorrows to be conscious of the smallest revival of old tenderness, “ I wish it had been my good fortune to have married you ! I am no pattern man, but I should never have grieved you, and you do not know how fond I was of you. Is there nothing I can do to help you ? Might I not, if I chance to hear him speak brutally to you, warn him that I consider myself as an elder brother, and bound to protect you ? ”

“ You would do me infinite harm,” returned Mrs. Harding quietly. “ The interference of any man not really a brother would be liable to all kinds of misinterpretation. You have no rights, and you would produce no effect. You can help

me most by keeping on good terms with Mr. Harding. You are in a certain degree a successful man, and I see he likes to stand well with you. He has a great regard for appearances out of doors, though he does not heed them at home. Do not let him see that you think him brutal, and he will restrain himself in your presence at least ; that is all you can do for me."

Mrs. Harding had recovered herself as she spoke, but there was profound hopelessness in her voice and eyes.

Brooke was greatly moved ; he started up and walked to and fro once, then, returning to his seat, he exclaimed—

"You say you have no courage, Livy ! It must be no common fortitude that enables you to face such a future. Good God ! it is a living death ! How can you support it ?"

"I have still a hope—still something to live for, to endure for. I have my children. *There* is the real bond ! I cannot and would not break away from my husband, for even if I could prove any legal justification, I could not take them all with me, and I should destroy the home. I could stand martyrdom a hundredfold more

detestable rather than do the smallest act that would injure the children. No ! my sole care is to keep the home as decent, as happy as I can for them, and to do *that* needs all my strength, my self-control, my *courage*, if I had any ; but I think as the children's needs increase it will revive ! God will give it me ! ”

She stopped an instant, and Brooke muttered something which was not a blessing. “ My little Willie,” resumed Mrs. Harding with unspeakable tenderness in her voice and eyes, “ is a delicate, timid, child ; he is no favourite with his father, and he fears him terribly. The poor little fellow's whole love and trust is in me, and I tell you, Jim, that I will *not* die, or yield to any misery, until I see that child old enough and strong enough to take care of himself.”

“ I can understand that,” said Brooke.

“ Ethel is a favourite, and Johnnie especially ; that boy's likeness to his father distresses me. There is a vulgarity of nature about him, too, that vexes me ; but he is not without feeling, and I will develop it. There, Jim, I have opened my heart to you, and it is an infinite relief. *You* are safe ! there is no one else I

could speak to. I, too, was very fond of you. I can say it now, when all is past and gone !”

“ I would not say so too often if I were you,” returned Brooke kindly. “ You are a very charming little woman, Livy, and I might like to hear it too much.”

She looked up to him with a sweet amused smile. “ No, I have no fears of that sort, Jim ! Mr. Harding put you quite out of my head. Do you know, I was really fond of him when I first married, he seemed so frank and free and fond of me. It was the finding him out that made the agony of our first years—that crushed me in the dust. I really suffer less now, but I do not *love* him !” She paused ; a peculiar smile curled her lip, and glittered in her eyes.

Brooke watched her keenly. “ No, I do not love him,” she repeated thoughtfully. “ Nor do I hate him now. I would not do him the smallest harm ; *but*, if he were to die ! I do not think I could contain my joy ! think of it, Jim ! my children, all my own ! to train as I believe to be best, to make their home lovely and refined, to be free !!”

“ To be happy, with some one who loved you

truly?" asked Brooke, curious to see what was the bent of her mind.

"I should want no love but the children's. No man should ever come between us. I could not support the idea of marriage; it has been to me the most utter degradation. I could have loved *you* well, Jim. I remember the time when your coming made my heart beat! Now, you are a dear pleasant friend, but as nothing to me compared to my children. See, talking of my possible love for you does not quicken my pulse by one throb." She stretched out her hand to him.

He took and held it closely in both his. "Yes," he said, "it is steady enough! Well, my sweet cousin, I lost what might have been the crown of my life when circumstances forbade our being united, but I will be your true friend. You will let me know whenever I can help you. I trust in God your children will repay you, but try and pluck up heart to put Harding down for their sakes. I am certain you could! It wrings my heart, Livy, to feel I can do so little for you, and you know there isn't much I would shrink from for your sake." He kissed the hand he

held as he spoke with warm, yet brotherly affection.

But while he was thus absorbed in his cousin's griefs and his own feelings, the door of the back drawing-room opened noiselessly, after the fashion of well-conducted doors, and Miss Stretton came in a few paces,—far enough to hear his last words,—to see him kiss the hand he held fervently. It was but a moment. Aunt Clem immediately retreated unperceived. She was only too happy to escape. She was by no means an intentional maker of mischief or a deliberate thinker of evil thoughts, and just then her sympathies were strongly on Mrs. Harding's side, who had always been kindly and courteous, and was distinctly in favour of establishing her with Stasie. Yet she was a little startled, and made a solemn resolution to hold her tongue. Then she reopened the door with a discreet amount of noise.

“Oh! I beg your pardon, Mrs. Harding. I just came to see if you were alone. I want that dear child to come downstairs, and she does not like to meet—a—Mr. Harding—or a——” she stopped.

“Well, I shall say good-morning,” said Dr.

Brooke, "I have paid you an unconscionable visit."

"I fancy Stasie was horribly vexed at your being present," said Mrs. Harding, rising to bid him good-bye.

"She need not have been! I think she turned the executor's flank cleverly; but it certainly was not pleasant to be spoken to so roughly before witnesses. I suppose, Mrs. Harding, you will be at Sefton Park when I return?"

"Yes; you will come and see us, will you not?"

"Without fail! Good-bye. Good-morning, Miss Stretton." And he was gone.

Sefton Park, the scene of Mr. Harding's speculation in land, was some twenty miles from town on one of the many lines diverging from the Waterloo Terminus.

It was a well-situated, well-wooded tract, rising up from the little local railway station to a ridge, at the top of which stood Sefton House, as the old original farm-dwelling purchased by Mr. Harding was called. From this

the ground sloped away suddenly, giving a fine view over a richly-cultivated and wooded country. A little below the old-fashioned house of mingled timber and brick which the Harding family occupied in summer, was a triangular space shaded by a couple of grand elms; this was partly occupied by the iron edifice which so offended the taste of the Rev. St. John Robinson, and nearly opposite this, at the other side of the road from Sefton House, was a neat villa in the suburban Tudor style.

A bow window at one side looked out on a large field and a fine group of beech-trees, behind which the sunset spread a gloriously-tinted background on fine evenings. At the opposite end of the house a sort of tower, which contained the staircase, diversified the outline; a tolerably large dining-room to the back commanded a vegetable garden; the kitchen lurked behind the tower, and in front stretched a pretty pleasure-ground with flower-beds, further adorned with a few chestnut-trees, limes, and elms, the remains of an old plantation which had been cleared to make way for the "house and grounds of Limeville," as the stately language of Mr. Harding's



advertisements described the tenement destined for Stasie's occupation.

Lower down and nearer the railway station were a variety of residences finished, in progress, and just begun—some small and picturesque in the “cottage orné” style, some huge red brick staring edifices, like London houses escaped from square or street, towering over their neighbours in hideous disproportion—bare and brazen, like big bullies. Moreover, in that portion of the park where one of the more ambitious shareholders had erected a couple of these “mansions,” there had been no woods, from which to cull some of the leafy nobles to confer grace and beauty on the intrusive cits, who paraded their unblushing ugliness among the fair fields.

One of these untempting abodes, which did not let readily, was assigned to the Rev. St. John Robinson. The little man lived in a corner of it, waited upon and dominated by an elderly female of stern aspect, who had been selected for him by his aunt, who was the wife of Mr. Williams, solicitor to the estate. He had, in the enthusiasm of his first arrival, planted some roots of ivy along his ruddy front wall, but the

owner objected to that parasite, as calculated to loosen the brick-work, and create damp. The ivy, depressed, perhaps, by this sentence, showed no vitality, and the Rev. St. John gave up the struggle. He had, however, an inscription painted on his gate post in red and dark blue old English characters, "St. Monica's Parsonage," which was a sort of promise that in time a real church and parsonage should beautify and elevate the neighbourhood.

With the usual variety of British climate, the damp oppressive Sunday had been succeeded by a bright, sunny, warm morning; and Stasie, recovered from the agitation and anger of the day before, prepared to accompany Mrs. Harding to Sefton Park.

Mr. Harding had remained to dine with his confidential man of business, and did not return till after Stasie had gone to bed. His mood was less furiously angry than his wife expected, and he did not use absolutely bad language respecting her carelessness, indifference, and stupidity as regarded Stasie.

At breakfast next morning, he tried to turn the subject into a kind of joke, as if Stasie had

been the only excited and abusive individual, but she would not let it pass. When he asked with meaning how she had slept, and hoped she had not had bad dreams after flying at her best friends like a tiger cat, she replied that she was equally anxious to know how *he* felt after exciting himself to so unpleasant a pitch as to draw forth the attack she had made.

Mr. Harding turned off this thrust by a laugh, and then with his frankest, kindest air, exclaimed, "Come now, Stasie, don't let us quarrel! You know you were enough to vex a saint. You forget, my dear girl, that Kharapet and myself have to account for every farthing and every bit of property that belongs to you, and apart from the interest we both feel in your affairs, it is a very serious thing to find you done out of fifty or sixty pounds! However, Kharapet has volunteered to release the trinkets, and says he will be quite content to receive the actual cash out of pocket without charging interest, which I must say is handsome!"

"Is it?" said Stasie indifferently. "I am very much obliged to him."

"And," continued Mr. Harding, "if you will

give me a solemn promise not to part with them for any purpose I will restore you the box and all that remains in it."

"I shall give no promise, and I do not want the box or its contents," said Stasie grandly, "at least until I can claim it by right. I care very little for jewels, and I detest obligations."

"Hoity toity!" cried Mr. Harding, a little surprised. "Well, you'll think better of it; anyhow let bygones be bygones, and be off, all of you, to see the house. I find I have to go to Manchester and Liverpool in about ten days, and I'd like to fix about the furnishing and all that before I go. You'll be better and safer out of London away from the pawnshops; and, by George! I believe that aunt of yours is a capital old woman. She and Kharapet seem to have hit it off first-rate!"

With these overtures Stasie thought it wiser to close, which she did the more readily, feeling that she had by no means had the worst of it.

A messenger was accordingly despatched to Aunt Clem, who had departed in great uncertainty the previous afternoon, begging her to meet Mrs. Harding and Stasie at the Waterloo Station; and the whole party (for the three

children and head nurse were permitted to join) started in high good-humour on their visit of inspection.

It was a very successful day. Stasie was agreeably surprised by the beauty of the view, and the pleasant situation of the villa offered to her, as it was quite out of sight and hearing of the houses lower down. It amused her to ramble all over the place guided by the children, and plan all sorts of country recreations; she thought that a summer and autumn might pass very pleasantly at Limeville, and went through the rooms with Aunt Clem, who was radiant, appropriating and distributing them, forming great schemes respecting the garden, and splendid projects as regarded future hospitalities.

Finally the gardener's wife, who had charge of Sefton House, gave them a delightful country-fied lunch. Ham and eggs, curds and cream, raspberries and currants—strawberries were nearly over; and Mrs. Harding made all arrangements for coming down the following week.

It was hard to drag the children away; to them Sefton Park was paradise. But at length, after being lost in the copse at the far end of the

park, chased out of the cow-house, and routed from the poultry-yard, Mrs. Harding was able to muster her forces at the little station, where the bowing, obsequious station-master delayed the seven-o'clock train one or two minutes to permit the important visitors time to take their places.

"I hope you are not very tired, Aunt Clem?" thus spoke Stasie as they reached Waterloo.

"My dear child, I am too happy to be tired! The idea of a few tranquil months in that sweet spot with *you* to cheer me, gives new life and strength to this weary frame."

"Yes, I think it will be very nice; but you must have a cab, auntie. Yes, I insist upon it; there, let me help you in."





## CHAPTER V.

AFTER some correspondence and considerable wrangling, all preliminary arrangements for setting up Stasie's *ménage* were at last made—Mr. Harding undertaking to pay a fair rent to himself; how much, Stasie never asked.

Mr. and Lady Elizabeth Wyatt were duly consulted, and expressed complete satisfaction. They were in fact so anxious to clear up all business prior to their tour of examination in Montenegro, that they were ready to accept almost any proposition.

All through these disputes and *pourparlers* Kharapet had been invariably on Stasie and Miss Stretton's side; he had been also scrupulously undemonstrative, very quiet, and slightly pensive. Indeed, his sole occupation seemed to be to fetch and carry for Miss Stretton and her niece.

Stasie felt quite angry with herself for wishing

o heartily that he would go away somewhere even for a few months, though she felt quite sure that he had given up his ridiculous fancies about herself.

In the midst of their preparations came a pressing invitation from Ella Mathews. She did not feel, she wrote, as if she could be married without Stasie. Mother and every one wished for Stasie. It was not a long journey, and they would not keep her more than a week.

Stasie at once declared her intention of accepting, and to her surprise met with no opposition.

It was a very happy visit. The wedding was as simple and homely as it could well be, yet it was full of the promise of true and deep happiness.

The bride and bridegroom had known and loved each other long and well, they were so ready to go hand in hand through rough and smooth, so kind and considerate for those they were leaving, so grateful for the sudden stroke of good fortune which permitted their union considerably before they had dared to hope for it, that none could fear for their future.

Stasie was delighted to be with Mrs. Mathews,



and help her to organise her house, which required much "seeing to," as that good woman expressed it, for she expected to begin the September term with four boarders—an exhilarating prospect—as she calculated on large benefits to accrue therefrom.

The return to the familiar ways, the homely occupations, the family interests she had been used to in her childish days, had a soothing, healthy influence on Stasie after the excitement and contradiction of her life at Mrs. Harding's, yet she did not look forward with the less satisfaction to a home with Miss Stretton. C—— was too far away from London and its advantages to make it a desirable abode, and though quite content for the present to stay in England, she had not in the least given up the idea of foreign travel.

Mrs. Mathews parted from her former *protégée* with unfeigned regret. She had been so helpful and cheery—so sympathetic and generally "improved," Mrs. Mathews thought.

"School has done you a world of good, my dear," she said; "you don't seem to go into tantrums now! You were such a peppery little

creature when you came first. How you and Bob used to fight, poor fellow ! every one was down on him, but *I* always knew he would come right ; and now he has got a good appointment. And do you know, that just before we came away he insisted on giving me the ten pounds I paid to get my ring out ! You remember that unfortunate business ? Where he got the ten pounds I don't know ; perhaps some of his pay was advanced to him—anyhow, it was the sweetest bit of money ever I had."

"I am sure it was," said Stasie heartily ; "and I believe too that Bob will astonish us all yet. I am sure he is clever, if he will only be steady."

This was just as she was leaving. Many hearty hugs and promises on the part of Mrs. Mathews to pay her dear Stasie a visit whenever she could be spared from home ensued, and assurances from Janet, now the eldest girl at home, that at any rate she would come and see Stasie in her own house, which seemed rather a good joke. So Stasie bade them very heartily farewell and sped Londonwards one fine afternoon at the end of July, feeling for the first time since she

had left the shelter of Mrs. Mathews' roof that she was going home.

With Aunt Clem she would be pretty well her own mistress, and yet could make her chaperon happy. She could practise to her heart's content without worrying any one, and if she was out of the way of good lessons, it would not be for long. Besides, the present was holiday time all over the world. Then she would have a subscription at Mudie's, and read quantities of interesting books, not all novels.

Her quarrel and reconciliation with Mr. Harding, her success in establishing herself with Aunt Clem, had put Dr. Brooke out of her head for the present; yet that Sunday, when she had left the drawing-room in a towering rage, there was something in his tone and gesture that conveyed the impression that he was on her side, but she did not think much of him. If they had not met again, he would have left little trace upon her mind or memory; if—— Oh, most fateful monosyllable!

. . . . .

Meantime Miss Stretton had not for many years, if ever, enjoyed herself so much as at this

period. Stasie left all details to her ; on her devolved the important business of seeing to the furniture, remonstrating against inferior articles, and protesting against lame sofas and unsteady tables, which she did with all the more firmness because Mr. Harding, to the relief of his family, was absent during this interlude, and left orders with the struggling upholsterer, who did work cheap for the ruling spirit of Sefton Park, to move the household goods from a tenement which had just been let on lease, to the villa occupied by Stasie, and to make good deficiencies.

Then the task of engaging servants was new and delightful so far. Miss Stretton was too inexperienced in household management to anticipate any difficulty in managing them. Through all these labours Mrs. Harding gave valuable assistance ; and, having now settled herself at Sefton Park, was on the spot. With her help Miss Stretton secured a nice good-humoured-looking housemaid ; while “cook” at the “House,” as the old dwelling-place was called, recommended a very “respectable young person,” a cousin of her own, who only “wanted experience” to be a “cook of high degree ;” of course

she (Mrs. Harding's *chef*) could give any hints that the neophyte might require. Miss Stretton hastened to secure this possible treasure. But, alas! it soon proved that the experience which was "only" wanted was about everything, as in the case of Susan, whom Miss Stretton preferred to call by her surname Barnet, as more genteel, want of experience meant total ignorance; and for some time Stasie and her aunt were forced to feed on scorched mutton, bleeding beef, watery vegetables, bullet-like potatoes, and extraordinary compounds either dried to chips, or swimming in smash, and intended for puddings; while the weekly accounts were of alarming and disproportioned magnitude; but we must not anticipate.

The day Stasie was expected home Mrs. Harding was obliged to go into town, and offered to meet her and convey her home, to Miss Stretton's great relief.

She had sat down to rest after her luncheon or early dinner, thinking how much and how well she had done, for Miss Stretton was one of those not uncommon individuals who are at once timid and conceited.

It was pleasant sitting there in the bay window of the drawing-room. The song of the birds, the perfume of the mignonette, which had considerably overrun the boundaries of its original bed in the neglected pleasure-ground, the regulating of which Stasie reserved for her own inspection, came through the open casement. After regarding the carpet with some pride (she had stood out stoutly for a new one, and gained her point—a fact that raised her in her own esteem and disposed her to believe temporarily in herself, as a woman of bold and determined character), Miss Stretton continued to muse sleepily on her own good fortune.

Here she was transplanted, as by an enchanter's wand, from a wretched top-bedroom and fare not too plentiful, to the comfort, the security of this pleasant home—to the dignity of being not only chaperon but aunt and nearest-of-kin to a handsome young heiress, who was inclined to pet and make much of her only relative. Most firmly did Aunt Clem resolve to make herself useful, agreeable, indispensable to that sweet, dear girl, Stasie, who was strong enough, too, to stand up for her-

self, and would not let Mr. Harding trample on her as he did on that poor weak creature, his wife. It was altogether a piece of luck beyond hope. Miss Stretton shuddered when she looked back on the varied discomforts and mortifications of her chequered career—its terrible uncertainty, too, or rather its terrible certainty of failing as years robbed her of her activity and efficiency.

Stasie, she thought, would not leave her unprovided for when age and helplessness crept over her. And if she married—well, please God, she would marry that nice, considerate Mr. Kharapet, who was calculated to make any woman happy, and who had as good as promised that he would provide for her (Miss Stretton) if she took his part and helped him to win the woman he so fondly loved, poor fellow! It was quite a pleasure to see a man so heartily and avowedly in love in these days of hardness and calculation.

With such soothing ideas growing indistinct, Miss Stretton had nearly dropped asleep, when she was roused by the door opening and the servant announcing "A gentleman, ma'am,"

which was Mary the housemaid's mode of surmounting the difficulty of a name she could not quite catch. Miss Stretton started up and instinctively put her hands to her cap as she turned to meet Kharapet, who advanced with a winning smile. "I am very glad to see you," exclaimed Aunt Clem warmly.

"Thank you, dear madam, thank you," returned Kharapet, taking her offered hand. "I have been looking forward to this pleasure, but did not like to intrude sooner, knowing you would be greatly occupied; but to-day I was anxious to have a little conversation before your niece returns."

"She is to be back this evening."

"I know, and I trust," accepting the chair drawn forward by Miss Stretton, "I trust you find all things satisfactory? Is your house comfortable? I do not pretend to understand all the needs of delicate English ladies, but if anything is deficient, let me know, and I think I shall be able to induce Mr. Harding to make it good."

"I am sure I am ever so much obliged to you, Mr. Kharapet. There are a few little things,



absolute necessities, which we really ought to have—a wardrobe for my room. There is but one, and of course that is for Stasie. Then the dining-room door will not fasten, and there is no butler's tray," etc. etc. etc.

Miss Stretton ran on with a string of absolute necessities which considerably surprised Kharapet.

He, however, took out his pocket-book, and gravely made a note of her demands. "Mr. Harding is perhaps a little hard in his dealings," he said. "A man of strict integrity, but severe."

"Well, I am sure his severity does not prevent him from furnishing his own house most luxuriously," said Miss Stretton with some tartness; "and I suppose my niece, Miss Verner, pays for what she has?"

"No doubt, dear madam; but it shall be my care that she gets full value for what she pays."

"Ah!" cried Miss Stretton, as if some new light had broken in upon her. "Well, Mr. Kharapet, I am sure you will do your best for us. I quite identify myself with my dear niece, you see. It is such a comfort to have a friend like yourself! And tell me, are you quite well? I must say you have not seemed so of late."

"I am better!" replied Kharapet with a deep sigh. "But the constant strain of deferred hope—of doubt—of—of dread—is trying! I had thought of risking an avowal to Stasie some weeks ago." He paused, looking keenly at his interlocutor from under his partly-drooped lids.

"And why didn't you?" exclaimed Miss Stretton briskly. "I can't think she would have refused you!"

These words satisfied Kharapet that the good aunt was still ignorant of the true state of the case. She was much too transparent a subject to be capable of deliberately misleading him.

"You do not understand the nature of my hesitation," said he softly. "At present we are on the happiest terms. She looks on me as a relative—a kind of uncle—and I fear waking her too rudely. In time, away from the excitement of her life in London, I hope to arouse in her sentiments similar to my own. It is to this end I crave your help. We will take time, dear Miss Stretton; we will take time!"

"Oh, as much time as you like!" cried Aunt Clem with a pleasant smile. "I assure you I

am in no hurry to quit such comfortable quarters. I am, I think, very disinterested to further your plans as I am ready to do."

"You are very kind," returned Kharapet emphatically; "but as to disinterestedness, I trust you know that your interests are bound up in mine. I hope you understand that I consider myself bound to take care of you, should the happy day arrive when I can call Stasie my wife."

"It is very good of you to say so," said Miss Stretton, with twinkling eyes; "and I will frankly admit that I depend upon you."

"You may, dear madam, you may," earnestly,—“and I depend upon you! I feel as if you were my best, my only friend! I own to fearing Mrs. Harding's enmity, I know not why, but I fancy Stasie's coldness and indifference of late are owing to her influence. I own I dread Mrs. Harding's cousin. He is not a good man!” Kharapet shook his head solemnly. “But he is gone, and his return is uncertain. I too am going away for a week or ten days. My noble friend and patron, Lord Saintsbury, has invited me. I will not intrude on Stasie until she is settled in

her new abode. I leave myself in your hands, my good friend ! You will do me what service you can. I do not ask you to speak of me save at intervals, as occasion offers. By and by you may say more. I will suggest—I will suggest.” He pressed his palms together, as was usual with him when very earnest.

“Very well ! - You may leave yourself in my hands, my dear sir ; for in seeking to serve you I feel sure I am acting for Stasie’s happiness also. I hope you will come and see us directly you return. I am quite sure you will be very welcome to Stasie as well as to myself. Now you must let me offer you some refreshment. I know you do not care for tea, but I think I can give you a tolerably good cup of coffee. If you will excuse me I will go and see to its preparation myself. And, oh ! I will give you Stasie’s portrait to look at. She was photographed just before we left town.”

So saying she placed a cabinet photograph in his hand and departed.

Kharapet walked slowly into the bay of the window where he had the best light, and gazed long, with burning eyes and a strange,

greedy, cruel smile, upon the picture. It was a good and pleasing likeness, the figure in profile, but a turn of the graceful throat bringing the face three-quarters round. There was a frank smile in the eyes, a tender sweetness in the mouth, and yet a look of resolution in the whole face that seemed to Kharapet to convey defiance—defiance to himself especially. How vividly he recalled her peculiar charm of complexion and colouring! His instinct prompted him to seize by force, were it necessary, and hold fast the woman who had roused his passion, whose youth and inexperience, by all the laws of nature and probability, ought to have given her unresistingly to his wishes; and yet there was an indefinable something under all her tenderness, and at times caressing softness, which, in spite of himself, he feared and shrank from. By one and the same impulse he could have clasped her in his arms and loaded her with kisses, while he could have cut her delicate flesh with the lash for her indifference and daring.

How fiercely and intensely he resolved that *nothing* should deliver her or her fortune out of his hand. It rested with herself to be his ruler

or his slave. His in either case she should be. The strength of his own will calmed him. It was not likely that equal force could be found in any of his possible rivals. Moreover, no one had any stronger claim to influence Stasie than himself: no one took any deep interest in her. That foolish elderly body her aunt, who counted for something at the present stage of affairs, notwithstanding her inherent insignificance, was all his own. He felt his growing power over her, and esteemed her accordingly, or rather weighed her in the cruel balance which tests all things by their possible utility to self. His was the nature that bows pliantly, willingly to the strong, but relentlessly crushes whatever is weak, and can no longer be of use. He was still musing over the photograph when the return of Miss Stretton warned him to put on his mask; and as the coffee soon appeared, he fell into soft and amiable conversation with his hostess, which she found most soothing to her taste and self love, it was so new to her to be a personage of any importance.

Together they discussed the necessity of mixing liberality with prudence. They agreed

touching Stasie's unfortunate attachment to the Mathews family, and congratulated each other that they were at a tolerably safe distance.

"I confess I rather dread their influence," said Miss Stretton, helping her guest to a second large slice of pound cake. "There is no doubt that Mrs. Mathews did her duty by Stasie, and is a good woman—Heaven forbid I should detract from any one's merits!—but when a mother has sons whose fortunes she could further in so agreeable and simple a way, it is not in human nature to—to refrain."

"You are right, you are right," returned Kharapet thoughtfully. "You are profoundly observant, and therefore I ask, do you think there was anything more than—than pity, sisterly feeling in Stasie's extraordinary and imprudent conduct respecting those jewels?" and he raised his large deep eyes to hers with a look that seemed to search her thoughts.

"What a handsome creature he is," thought the imaginative spinster, as she answered with an amiable smile: "Nothing, my dear sir, nothing whatever. You could see she despised that good-for-nothing Bob Mathews; and when

a girl, especially a girl like Stasie, despises any one, it is all over."

"But he is young and she is young, and if he spoke to her of love, of course she would love him."

"My dear Mr. Kharapet, it would be much more likely that she would box his ears and send him about his business. English girls are not like over-ripe plums, ready to drop into the first hand that touches them;" and Miss Stretton laughed at her own smartness.

A slow cynical smile crept over Kharapet's face.

"Nature," he said, "nature, dear madam, is pretty much alike in all; but Stasie is slow to waken."

"By the way, what have you done about those jewels?" asked Miss Stretton with some curiosity. "The interest will run up frightfully."

"Do you think," cried Kharapet indignantly, "that I should be guilty of such culpable negligence? No. I have redeemed them. I redeemed them immediately."

"Oh, indeed," cried Aunt Clem. "I am sure Stasie will be pleased to have them again."



"Ah!" returned Kharapet, rubbing his hands slowly together. "You must be aware that I could not give them back without Mr. Harding's consent, and he is suspiciously distrustful; besides he is away, and we must confess it was a startling act."

"It was a natural impulse in a generous young creature."

"Do you think," asked Kharapet insinuatingly, "you could induce her to give you the remaining trinkets to keep? and you might pass them on to me. It is possible some such generous impulse might seize her again."

"Not I, indeed," cried Aunt Clem, laughing. "I will not vex my dear niece in such matters, and I think you may make your mind easy; she will never give away what specially belonged to her mother: take my advice, let the matter rest. If she knows you have taken the other things out and not given them back to her she will—well, she will not be pleased."

"But will she not see my care for her interest?" cried Kharapet.

"She will not care a straw about that," said Miss Stretton; "eight or ten years hence she

may, not now : believe me, I know her, and you had better be guided by me. I can give you many hints."

Kharapet looked earnestly at her, "I begin to think you are right," he said.

Mrs. Harding and Stasie did not reach Sefton Park till seven o'clock, and found nurses and children gathered at the little station to meet them. They were received with much attention by the station-master, with whom, as with most of the employés about the place, Mrs. Harding was a great favourite, while the children hailed Stasie with shouts of welcome.

"This is really like coming home," said Stasie.

"Yes," returned Mrs. Harding, to whose hand Willie was clinging. "It is very nice, that home feeling. You will be pleased to see how well Miss Stretton is looking. She told me as I passed this morning that she preferred waiting to receive you at home, and to have all ready. I wanted you both to have high tea with me, but she thought it better not."

"Thank you, dear," returned Stasie. "I

think it is better I should spend the first evening with my aunt. I am sure she is very happy, poor thing !”

Here, a short slight man in a very ecclesiastical-looking single-breasted frockcoat, who had been speaking to one of the porters; turned round, and, raising his soft felt hat, approached Mrs. Harding. “I am glad to see you back again,” he said. “I understood you had gone away for some weeks.”

“No, only for a few hours’ shopping in town, and to meet my friend Miss Verner. Stasie, let me introduce Mr. Robinson. I have brought an addition to your flock, Mr. Robinson. This lady and her aunt have taken Limeville.”

“I am very happy to hear it,” said the Rev. St. John Robinson with his natural frank courtesy. “We are glad to welcome any addition to our congregation, especially if it be a recruit for the choir. I am in some difficulty, Mrs. Harding; we have lost one of our best voices—Miss Thorne. She has gone away for the autumn, and is then to be married.”

A short conversation on local matters ensued. Then Johnnie asked to drive the cart which had

been sent to take Stasie's luggage, and on his receiving permission, Miss Ethel clamoured to be taken up also. Willie, however, still clung to his mother, so the elders of the party proceeded to walk up the central road towards Sefton House—Mr. Robinson beside Mrs. Harding, and nurse trying to keep up with the cart, wherein Johnnie stood triumphant like a classic charioteer.

"I believe my old friend Jim Brooke is a connection of yours," said the incumbent breaking away suddenly from his previous subject.

"You know him?" returned Mrs. Harding in some surprise.

"Oh yes; we were at school together. He was my patron and protector, and very good to me, though he was a trifle overbearing and pugnacious."

"I could quite imagine that," cried Stasie impulsively, and the next moment was sorry she had spoken.

"Why should you?" said Mrs. Harding. "I have always found him kind and gentle."

"He could scarcely be anything else with you."

"I am not so sure; boys can often be rough enough to their female relatives, and men too."

"You surely are mistaken!" exclaimed Robinson, evidently shocked.

"I hope so," said Stasie.

"I had a letter from Brooke yesterday," resumed the young clergyman. "He has left his friends at Dieppe, and writes from Geneva; he is going to have a look at some of the German towns. He came home through Italy, you know. I wish he would settle in London; I am sure he would make his mark. He is a very clever fellow."

"I wish he would," echoed Mrs. Harding; "but I think he is fond of the life in India, yet he is ambitious."

"Yes, but to succeed in London requires capital, especially for a medical man," returned Robinson.

Thus talking, they passed the lower portion of the park and the staring houses before described. Stasie, taking Willie's hand, walked on with some eagerness in front. She was dying to be at home—to be welcomed by Aunt Clem.

As the road ascended, the view towards the Surrey hills widened. The setting sun gleamed in golden glory through the leafy screen to the

west, and Stasie thought it was indeed a delightful place.

"I will let you meet Miss Stretton without me," said Mrs. Harding, pausing at the gate of Limeville. "I think she would very naturally like to have you to herself; perhaps you will both come out for a stroll after tea."

"I will, at any rate," cried Stasie, and with a bow to Robinson, she ran quickly through the garden to the open door, where stood Aunt Clem in a new dress, bristling with flounces, plissés, and dangling ends of ribbon.

Need it be said with what effusive joy she was welcomed—with what pride she was led from room to room—with what eloquence Aunt Clem described the battles she had fought over each superior article of furniture—with what care and caution she insinuated that Mr. Harding, no doubt from the best motives, was just a *leetle* hard to deal with? Then the servants were presented to their young mistress, who repudiated the title, declaring that she wished it to be applied to her aunt. "I am too young and too ignorant to manage things, auntie, and as you will have all the trouble, you had better have all

the authority too. I see you have given me the best and biggest bedroom, with a dressing room too. *You* ought to have that; I don't want to be made a personage of, only to do pretty well what I like and enjoy myself, as I am sure I shall with you, dear auntie. How nice you have made everything, and what a heap of trouble you have taken! I think we shall be very happy here for a few months, and then perhaps you will feel well enough to travel. You look, oh! so much better."

"And I feel so, dearest Stasie. I do not doubt that after a month's repose and happiness with you I shall feel quite ten years younger and equal to anything."

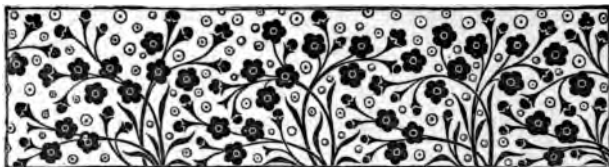
So, with generous kindness, looking forward to make those around her happy, content with the present, though eager for further and higher enjoyment, and not dreaming that clouds could gather over a future so bright and full of promise as her own, Stasie entered on this new phase of her existence.

She soon contrived to fill her days not unprofitably. She applied herself to gardening with enthusiasm, under the guidance of Mrs. Harding's

gardener, and she gave what help she could to Mr. Robinson in his choir and school. These avocations, with long walks in Mrs. Harding's company and a subscription to Mudie's, left no time on her hands. Miss Stretton, having once organised the household, did not over-exert herself. She found some congenial society among the residents at Sefton Park—ladies who had enjoyed fewer advantages, and boasted fewer pretensions than herself, and who treated her with a deference equally new and delightful. Thus all went well. Mr. Harding's absence was unusually prolonged, and his wife deeply enjoyed the breathing space thus afforded her to recover her strength for future trial.







## CHAPTER VI.

THOUGH amused and interested in the various places he visited, Brooke grew tired of travelling alone, and made his way towards London some five or six weeks after he had left it.

He had promised to visit a friend of his brother who had made a fortune in the Colonies, and settled in Scotland, where he offered Brooke the inducement of good shooting and a pleasant party. Of course it was necessary to take London *en route*, and once there it was incumbent on him to see Mrs. Harding and Miss Verner. It was curious how interested he felt respecting the latter,—who was a stranger, and a somewhat hasty self-willed personage. Yet he was anxious to be good friends with her again, and to be on the same footing as before she had outraged his sense of propriety. He was even vexed with himself for having misjudged

her, and anxious to see how she would receive him.

It was a fine autumnal evening, and the suburban Park looked to great advantage as he walked leisurely up the hill, having asked his way to Mr. Harding's house.

He noticed as he went along the flaring red-brick mansion with the inscription "St. Monica's Parsonage," and thought he would call on his friend Robinson before he returned to town; so thinking, he reached the top of the hill, and saw the low rambling house, its porch covered with honeysuckle, the gable nearest the road sheltered by two huge lime trees, and beyond, at the opposite end, a big brown barn roofed with mellow red tiles, which dwarfed the dwelling-house, and had quite a grand air, owing to its high arched doors, under which a loaded wain could pass. Beyond, again, came a clump of oaks and elms, and from an open space in front of the entrance stretched the leafy avenue before described.

A small lawn or pleasure-ground bordered with rose-trees, some of which were still in bloom, and studded with beds of geraniums and

verbena, lay between the road and the house, across which a straight path led to the door.

Here Ethel and Willie were playing "Les Graces," and no sooner had they caught sight of Brooke than they threw away hoops and sticks, and ran forward with shouts to meet him.

"Oh! Dr. Brooke! you have been away such a long time."

"I am so glad you have come back! Mamma is writing in the sitting-room. Come in, come in."

"We have another pony this summer," cried Willie.

"And we have a governess, and lessons *all* the time; isn't it a shame?" exclaimed Ethel.

Brooke greeted them cordially, and each taking a hand, led him to the house, chattering as they went.

"Mamma, mamma! here is Dr. Brooke," cried Willie, throwing open the door of a long narrow room panelled with oak, and afflicted with a cross light, having a window at each end. A thick Persian carpet and a few attractive easy-chairs gave an air of comfort to the homely room. At a centre table Mrs. Harding sat

writing. She started up with a look of unmistakable pleasure, as the children and their captive entered. Brooke was glad to see that she looked better and brighter than when he left her.

"I had no idea you were coming back so soon," she said, after the first words were exchanged. "When did you arrive?"

"The day before yesterday. No, I have not stayed away as long as I intended," and he entered into some description of his wanderings, to which the children listened eagerly, till a dark-eyed smart-looking little lady in a black dress came in, and, with a pretty curtsy to Mrs. Harding, summoned "*ces chers enfants*" to their lessons. Ethel and Willie reluctantly obeyed.

"That is a new importation?" said Brooke, who had risen on her entrance, as he resumed his seat.

"Yes, the children ran too wild here, so I found a French girl to teach them. She is a nice little thing, and useful to me in many ways. Have you had luncheon, Jim?"

"Thank you, yes. Now tell me all your news since that Sunday when I witnessed the scene about the jewels."

Mrs. Harding smiled and coloured a little. "That horrible day!" she said. "However, all well that ends well. Things came quite right after. Mr. Harding was called out of town on some business, and got over his vexation. Mr. Kharapet behaved amazingly well; he went and released the jewels,—but holds them,—and Stasie is settled quite near us, with Miss Stretton as her companion and chaperon. I think she is very happy and quite busy. We will go and see her presently. It is a wonderful addition to my life having her here. She cheers and interests me."

"So it seems," he returned, looking steadily at her. "I see a great change for the better in you, Livy! I hope, my dear little cousin, that things are easier for you than when we last spoke. I have often thought of our conversation!"

"So have I, and partly regretted it," exclaimed Mrs. Harding. "But I could not keep back the words, it was such a relief to tell you the misery of my life! But somehow things are better, Jim, or I have more hope, a sort of feeling that the worst is over, that something of courage is growing up in my heart! You may

think it a trifle, when I tell you an incident that has revived my soul." She paused.

"Go on," said Brooke.

"About a fortnight ago Johnnie went to a boarding-school for the first time. I am ashamed—no, not ashamed, why should I be? I am obliged to say that I looked forward to his absence with a certain sense of relief. The night before he left I was alone with him; he suddenly threw his arms round me, and exclaiming, 'I know I have been a bad naughty boy to you, but I do love you, mother—I do, I do!' he burst into sobs, and hugged me with all his might. Jim, I cannot tell you how his words filled me with joy and hope. The child *has* a heart, and it is mine! His love for me will be the saving of him, and to me an infinite reward."

A wonderful glow lit up her face, a smile of unspeakable tenderness curved her lips; she was lovely at that moment. Brooke looked at her with deep and warmest sympathy.

"Yes," he said, "the love of a mother like you ought to be the salvation and the making of any boy. I never knew anything like it."

"But you were strong enough to make your-

self," exclaimed Mrs. Harding, recovering her composure. "Do you know, I fancy you have more feeling now than you used to have?"

"Perhaps so," replied Brooke thoughtfully; "I imagine it takes knowledge and experience to develop a boy's heart, whereas a girl's is so much more delicately organised that she feels and perceives instinctively where we are impervious; but you don't think me a cold-hearted fellow, Livy?"

"No, indeed, I do not; though you are far from soft! I should be so glad to see you happily married, Jim. In spite of my own experience, I believe no life is so happy—as *happy* married life. Children are such marvellous teachers; no one knows more than one side of existence who has never experienced what it is to be a parent; but you must be prudent and choose well."

Brooke laughed. "If I begin to be deliberate in such a choice, I suspect I shall go wrong," he said. "I look for what my friend Robinson would call 'divine guidance'—that is, impulse, and the mysterious attractions which no philosophy can explain."

"The effects of which are sometimes disastrous," replied Mrs. Harding gravely.

"No ; not except with weak blockheads."

"Which, you flatter yourself, you are not ?" said Mrs. Harding, laughing. Then they passed to other topics, and spoke of Mrs. Harding's only sister, who was married to a man in the Indian Civil Service, and wrote rarely. Brooke had heard of the husband as a rising man, and Mrs. Harding was interested in her sister's prospects.

At length Brooke said it was time to think of returning to town.

"You need not hurry away, Jim ; come with me to see Stasie, and I will walk with you to the station after. You know I never ask *any* one to dinner without first apprising Mr. Harding, though you are rather a favourite with him."

"I regret to say the feeling is *not* mutual," said Brooke, laughing. Mrs. Harding made no reply, but, putting up her writing, went into the hall, or rather entry, and took her garden hat which hung there. "This is a nice place," said Brooke, as they issued from the house.

"It is. I am fond of it, and always have felt less unhappy here than in London. The air too is pleasant and remarkably healthy."

"Tell me," resumed Brooke, "how does Khara-



pet get on? Is he still persevering in his designs on Miss Verner?"

"He has been very persevering and determined hitherto, and has made himself exceedingly useful, nay indispensable, to Miss Stretton, who is not the best manager in the world; but he gains no ground, indeed he loses it. Though Stasie says nothing, I can trace indications of disgust and repulsion which she never showed before. I have an idea that some little time ago he made Stasie a declaration—probably a violent one; for though he has enormous self-control, there is a tiger under the soft fair outside."

"The presumptuous beggar!" cried Brooke, "he is incapable of measuring the distance between Miss Verner and himself; no Eastern could possibly perceive it. I cannot tell you how murderous I feel, when I see that fellow's eyes resting as they do on your young friend."

"It annoys me too; and, between ourselves, I think Mr. Harding would rejoice in his discomfiture."

"Why then does he openly countenance his pretensions?" cried Brooke. "It is a serious

matter to play fast and loose with so precious a thing as a woman's whole future."

"It is certainly ; but, Jim, no great harm can be done ; Stasie will never listen to him ; and I think he is giving up himself, for he is going away in a few days to pay a round of visits to some grand country-houses—Lord Saintsbury's among the number. Perhaps he will find some less obdurate heiress than Stasie."

"She has money, has she not ?" asked Brooke.

"Yes," said Mrs. Harding, laughing ; "I am not sure how much, for both Mr. Harding and Kharapet are very reticent on the subject. Are you interested ?"

"Yes. It is a very strong reason for Kharapet's hanging on to her like grim death. I have a great dislike to these Eastern Christians."

"Is not that unjust, Jim ? They have been a persecuted race, and surely the religion they profess must in some way bring forth fruit."

"I doubt it. It was necessary for Christianity to filter through a Western medium to become what it is. Depend upon it, the early converts, could their dust be reanimated, would be greatly

astonished at the outcome of Paul and Peter's preaching."

Mrs. Harding did not answer, and a few moments more brought them to the gate of Limeville, Stasie's new home. The entrance door stood open in country fashion, and Mrs. Harding walked in without ceremony.

Crossing a neat little hall, Brooke followed her into the drawing-room, which was sweet with the scent of flowers, and full of mellow light, as the venetian blinds softened the glare of the evening sun.

Miss Stretton was settled comfortably in an easy chair for the uninterrupted perusal of the *Times*, and rose to receive her visitors with her wonted amiability.

"Where is Stasie?" asked Mrs. Harding.

"She must be in the garden, I think; I have not seen her since dinner. She often goes to read to Janet there."

"I will go and look for her," replied Mrs. Harding. "I hope she is not gardening in the sun again. Strong as she is, she cannot dispense with ordinary prudence," and she stepped through the open window.

“ You seem to have a pleasant abode here,” said Brooke. “ How does Miss Verner like such retirement ? ”

“ She seems exceedingly happy ; indeed she has the sweetest possible nature, and is so easily pleased. Of course, though I say it myself, she finds the warmest sympathy and devotion from me, and hers is a heart that would pine without such solace. She has her little whims, it’s true. There is one of those Mathews that she fancied was out of health, so she has had her up here, and just lavishes every care upon her—reading improving books, hearing her practise, and all that—exceedingly praiseworthy, but a little tiresome. Yes, the place is charming, and the repose in my weak state of health is most soothing, nor is it monotonous. Our good friend, Mr. Kharapet, is frequently here, and is a most delightful companion. I do not know what we shall do when he goes away. Mr. St. John Robinson, too, is a great addition to our small society, though scarce sufficiently evangelical in his views for me. Altogether we are very happily placed. And so you have been travelling on the Continent, Dr. Brooke ? ”

Brooke assented, adding that he found a great charm in the mediæval towns of Southern Germany."

"Ah, yes! I know some of them well. Dresden, and Berlin, and——"

Miss Stretton's further reminiscences were cut short by the return of Mrs. Harding, who was followed by an awkward-looking girl of fourteen or fifteen in a striped cotton dress that showed a pair of gigantic boots. A large and would-be ornamental pinafore slipping off one shoulder gave her an air of crookedness, not redeemed by a broad, heavy-looking freckled face and rather coarse red hair. Outside Brooke could hear Stasie's voice saying "Thank you! You have done it very nicely indeed; now you might move these plants nearer the outer paling." An indistinct murmur followed, and then Stasie stepped into the room—Stasie, in a simple lilac print, a black waistband marking out her supple waist, a large garden hat shading her face, and wash-leather gauntlet gloves defending her hands.

Brooke took in every detail of her figure (he could hardly make out her face), even while bow-

ing at Mrs. Harding's formal words—"Dr. Brooke, Miss Janet Mathews." He was scarcely aware how much he had been haunted by the vision of Stasie—erect, indignant, defiant, as he last saw her, until she thus stood before him in a mood so different.

"I did not think you would be back so soon," said Stasie almost in Mrs. Harding's words, as she drew off her rather earth-stained glove and gave him a soft, warm, white hand. Some undefined change struck Brooke's vividly-awakened senses; something gentler, milder in her tones; something slower and less alert in her movements, as she walked to the sofa and sat down, removed her hat and placed it beside her, raising her eyes to his with a smile. "I did so envy you when you were going, and now I am very pleased with this place. Still, I hope to make the grand tour myself as soon as Aunt Clem is strong and well. Don't you think she looks better?"

"Very much better," returned Brooke stoutly (he had a very misty recollection of her former aspect). "But she can hardly fail to get all right here."

There was a slight pause, filled up by Miss

Mathews, who exclaimed, "Do you know, Mrs. Harding, that the rector is going to have a school feast, after all! Mr. Robinson was here this morning and told us. We are all to help."

"I am sorry my strength is not equal to the task," said Miss Stretton. "Mr. Robinson knows that my spirit is willing, but—" an expressive hesitation.

Mrs. Harding seemed interested, and while the three engaged in a discussion on the subject, Brooke approached Stasie.

"So, after all, you did not carry out your plan," he said.

"I put it off of my own free will," she replied. "I could not drag my aunt away when she was unfit to move."

"No, of course not! You seem to have a nice garden? Will you show it to me?"

"Yes, if you like," frankly; "we have some delightful old trees that make it pretty." She took up her hat again, unnoticed by the others, and stepped through the window. Brooke followed, and they strolled over the mossy grass for a minute or two in silence.

"There is our avenue, of which we Sefton-

Parkians are very proud. Then, this is my study on fine days," leading the way to a rustic hexagonal summer-house partly enclosed, which was raised on a green mound, and through the open panels of which a view could be obtained of Mr. Harding's somewhat picturesque residence. "You see the commonplace road and houses are quite invisible from this,"

"Yes ; it is very well arranged."

"But you cannot think what a state of neglect we found it in," Stasie went on, warming with her subject. "Fortunately the grass was good ; it only wanted watching and cutting, and now it is quite velvety."

"How long have you been here ?" asked Brooke.

"Nearly two months."

"Do you know," resumed Brooke, after a moment's silence, "I have always wanted to apologise to you for having been present at that uncomfortable scene, when——"

"Yes, I remember," said Stasie, interrupting him as he paused, having thoughtlessly rushed into an awkward subject. "I was vexed about it at the time,—one does not like to be scolded



roughly before a stranger,—but I don't care now. I gained my point ; and," her eyes sparkling with a keen sense of the ridiculous, "do you remember Mr. Kharapet's face of terror and dismay as he felt about among the cotton-wool, and found nothing ! I don't think the loss of all the trinkets in Europe or Asia would have so moved an Englishman, except, indeed, Mr. Harding."

"Flattering opinion you seem to have of that gentleman ! I confess I felt inclined to give him a shake when I heard him speak as he did."

"They say I ought not to have written to *you*—I mean about meeting you when I was with poor Bob Mathews—but I cannot see it," returned Stasie reflectively, and as if to herself. "Did you think it very wrong ?"

"It was unconventional, not what can be termed wrong," said Brooke, availing himself of her eyes being downcast in thought to study the expression of her face.

"I don't see how I could have managed without writing to you," said Stasie, still musing ; then suddenly turning her sweet frank eyes upon him, she exclaimed archly, "I don't think you

approved of it yourself! I remember I felt so at the time."

"Did you?" exclaimed Brooke. "I am very flattered at your *feeling* anything respecting my approval!" The words had hardly passed his lips before he felt they were a mistake, although a genuine expression.

"There is nothing flattering to you in my perceiving that your manner changed in an indefinable way. It only showed I was not quite stupid—I really am not! and I think I am waking up here. I like the place, and I like to see Aunt Clem so happy, and to be in my own house, and able to ask one of the Mathews' to stay with me. That girl is Mrs. Mathews' second daughter. She has rather outgrown her strength, and she is not very bright now, but I am quite sure she will turn out much cleverer than they expect."

"I am sure you are a kind hostess, Miss Verner. I am glad to find you are so satisfied with your surroundings. I often thought of you when I was in Munich and Dresden, and Nurnburg especially. You would be charmed with them, especially Nurnburg."

"I wish I had been with you!" cried Stasie warmly, and this time Brooke judiciously held his tongue. "But I have by no means given up my plans, only I see Mr. Harding and Hormuz are determined to oppose me. However, I have a will of my own, I assure you."

"I am already convinced of it," said Brooke gravely.

Stasie laughed pleasantly. "Come, now, and see our kitchen garden," she said, and led the way through a gate in a low wooden paling, overgrown with ivy, into a good-sized patch of ground, where peas, French beans, lettuce, and such finer vegetables seemed flourishing. "It is quite delightful to eat things out of one's own garden, I can assure you; but it takes a great deal of care and trouble to keep it in order."

While she spoke, a very unusual figure—unusual at least in a suburban park—came out from behind a high range of scarlet runners. A short slight man, in dark trousers, a sailor-like jacket, and a scarlet and purple waistcoat edged with gold cord; his dark-brown face and large Eastern eyes were surmounted by an embroidered cap.

"Why, what a strange gardener you have, Miss Verner! Where did you pick him up?"

"I will tell you in a moment," she said smiling, and then nodded to the man, who made a deep bow, carrying his hand to his forehead.

"That is our right-hand man," she resumed, as he passed out of earshot, and they strolled slowly round the garden. He is from Bombay. He used to be at Mardin, and Hormuz found him by a strange chance. But first I must tell you that I was so delighted with the garden when we came here that I worked too much in it, especially in the sun; and one day, about a fortnight ago, perhaps a little more, I grew queer and giddy, and so sick and uncomfortable! Aunt Clem was quite frightened. Hormuz came down the next day, and made such a fuss. So I said I must have a gardener. Of course Mr. Harding grumbled about the expense. Then Hormuz said he had met a poor Hindoo, who begged of him in the street, and, moved by compassion, he had helped him. (I could not help wondering, Dr. Brooke, if Hormuz *really* had given him money.) He said he would be thankful to serve

us for food and shelter, and that he might be very useful ; so he is. He speaks a little English, and is so nice and well-mannered. The servants are delighted with him. Aunt Clem wanted to put him into livery, but I laughed at her. He keeps the garden very neat, but he does not really understand gardening. Indeed, he ought to have a better situation."

"These Eastern fellows are wonderfully handy and intelligent about work," said Brooke, looking after the lithe figure retreating with a slow, dignified step towards the house. "He is in luck to get housed here."

"I assure you he is quite a treasure. The little Hardings are so fond of him, and Mr. Robinson (he is a friend of yours, is he not ?) talks of converting and baptizing him. If so, I shall be his godmother."

"I think Robinson had better let that alone !" returned Brooke.

Here the sound of voices and footsteps approaching made them look round, and they saw Mrs. Harding and Janet coming to join them.

After some further conversation Dr. Brooke took leave, having promised to come again soon,

and bring the photographs he had collected during his travels for their inspection.

With a sense of having spent the afternoon pleasantly, he walked at a slow pace down the road, and paused at St. Monica's parsonage, intending, if asked, to dine with his old friend. But Mr. Robinson was out; he had gone to town, his servant said, and was not expected to return till the last train.

Brooke therefore returned to the lodgings in which he had established himself, intending to make London his headquarters for some time, and found them uncommonly dreary and desolate.





## CHAPTER VII.

THE day after Dr. Brooke's visit Mr. Harding took a holiday. He had designed a new fowl-house, with some curious arrangements, by which he hoped to ensure the correct return of all eggs laid therein. He rather enjoyed overseeing, and even sharing the work of his employés, especially of extracting the last farthing's worth of labour.

He was in high good-humour—to his wife's relief, as she had, with Stasie, planned a little excursion and gipsy tea at a favourite spot two or three miles distant, where, in the midst of a heathy common, a sudden hillock or knoll was crowned with a clump of larch and pine trees.

The children's ponies and a rusty basket-carriage drawn by one of the horses employed about the place, were the means of locomotion.

Great were the anticipations called forth by these preparations for an afternoon's outing, and were the fears lest "papa's" unexpected holiday should interfere with the pleasure party.

However, papa did not want any one but the carpenter and the "odd man" who was generally working about the place. He told them all they might be off as soon as they liked, and desired they should not forget nose-bags for the horses, as they were by no means to go to any inn or table, to run up expenses."

They accordingly started in the highest spirits. Ethel and Willie on two little Shetlands, tame as dogs; Janet Mathews, proud and happy, on a mild low-spirited pony of larger size, lent for the occasion by Mr. Robinson; while Stasie, with the courage of ignorance, undertook to drive Mrs. Harding and Made-noiselle in the carriage.

Miss Stretton had declined the party with great regret, but she feared damp, and also dreaded fatigue; though much better, she was glad to say, she was not yet strong enough to take liberties.

It was not prudence, however, which was



really at the bottom of Miss Stretton's refusal, rather a hope that Mr. Kharapet would pay a farewell visit previous to leaving London, as he had not appeared at Limeville for three days. Miss Stretton had fallen so far under his influence that she ardently desired to take his parting instructions in a *tête-à-tête*, and she shrewdly expected that he would not depart without bestowing them.

She had grown to believe her fortunes depended upon the soft-spoken Eastern, who evidently, with all his gentle deference, had some pull upon Mr. Harding in spite of the latter's affectation of blunt strength and overbearing prosperity. Aunt Clem was proud of her own tact in making friends with "that nice kind Mr. Kharapet, who is never tired of helping us in every way, I do trust."—Thus her reflections generally terminated.—"Dearest Stasie will see her own true interest and accept him, but young girls are apt to make fatal mistakes."

Miss Stretton was right. About an hour after the merry party had set out on their expedition, a ring announced a visitor, and Mr. Kharapet, who never took the liberty of entering without

notice, was duly heralded by the neat parlour-maid.

"I thought you would come to-day," said Miss Stretton, who was attired in a new and most elaborate cap, as she rose to meet him, "so I refused to go with the rest to have tea at the larches."

"Is Stasie not at home then?" asked Kharapet, with a swift glance round the room.

"No; she is gone with Mrs. Harding and the children to have a gipsy-tea at some distance."

Kharapet sat down, and a low quick sigh escaped him. "I wished to see her," he said, "but I can wait. I have also to call on Mr. Harding, who was not at his office to-day. And are you well, dear madam? feeling stronger and better?"

Miss Stretton was much better; feeling years younger in short.

"You continue to find Bhoodhoo useful?"

"Extremely. Indeed, I do not know what we should do without him."

"Ah, that is well. Do not hesitate to make him work. I doubt not he can cook and do

many things, more than you imagine." An abrupt pause, and Aunt Clem observed that Kharapet looked less blandly smiling than usual.

"And what has happened since I saw you last," he asked, slowly rubbing his hands together, and fixing his large soft dark eyes on her.

"Not much ; that girl is still here. Not that she interferes much, but I don't quite like to see the hold those Mathews have upon our dear Stasie. She is quite devoted to Janet—inspects her practising—makes her read aloud—a perfect torture, I assure you, my dear sir ! Then there must be eggs beaten up in milk before breakfast ; a glass of port-wine at eleven ; and calves-foot jelly for supper ! really a serious addition to the housekeeping when one has a limited, a *very* limited allowance ! But Stasie is young and enthusiastic, and probably likes having a sort of toy !"

"Probably, probably ; still I do not like the idea of all this devotion to the sister of that—that evil-disposed young man, who induced Stasie to part with her jewels. That was a terrible affair. I endured much. I bore with great provocation."

"No doubt ; but, Mr. Kharapet, you need not distress yourself about Bob Mathews ! My niece would not look at him were he hung with monds."

"Ha, you think so ? Alas ! I fear your accustomed wisdom fails you in this matter ! How I account for Stasie's indifference to myself by her preference for another ?"

"Still I do not think she gives a thought to Bob Mathews," persisted Miss Stretton, not noticing the self-conceit of Kharapet's speech. By the way, I forgot to mention *that* Dr. Locke, Mrs. Harding's cousin, called here yesterday."

"Did he ?" cried Kharapet, a sudden gleam : a flash of forked lightning sparkling in his eyes. He recovered himself instantly. "I thought that gentleman was gone away for a long, an indefinite time."

"Well, he is back again, and from what I can gather he is to make some stay in London."

Kharapet murmured something not English, then, rising from his seat, walked to the window, looked out a moment, and returned. "I see

Bhoodhoo is busy in the garden," he said. "I trust, then, Stasie does not expose herself to the sun?"

"I think not," replied Miss Stretton, and waited, perceiving that Kharapet had more important matter in his mind.

He resumed his seat. "May I be quite confidential? you will not betray me?"

"Have I ever betrayed any one?" said Aunt Clem sentimentally, "least of all a good and true friend, as I believe *you* to be."

Kharapet smiled, a rather forced smile. "Then, dear Miss Stretton, I will confide to you that I ventured to try my chance with Stasie Verner, and—she refused me."

Miss Stretton sat bolt upright with an expression of the greatest interest and surprise, but she did not interrupt the speaker.

"She did not speak harshly or very decidedly, and I have by no means lost hope; but it is well to be very prudent in such a crisis, and—I confess I fear this proud cold doctor. He is no doubt attracted by Stasie's fortune. I implore you be watchful, and do not encourage him."

"Of course I will not. You know I sin-

cerely wish you success with Stasie. (Sly thing never to tell me a word about your offer!) But I think you alarm yourself unnecessarily," concluded Miss Stretton with a complacent simper, as if she knew a thing or two.

"How do you mean?" asked Kharapet, eying her with curiosity.

"Oh! I don't mean much, and I don't know much, only I am convinced that Stasie Verner is *not* the attraction for Dr. Brooke at Sefton Park."

"How? who then? Nay, dear lady, I pray you speak."

"Well—but remember it is the greatest secret, and I don't mean to say I believe there is anything *really* wrong, only——" she paused, and Kharapet kept his great watchful eyes fixed upon her—"I mean to say that I think Dr. Brooke is very fond of, and very sympathetic with, Mrs. Harding."

Kharapet suddenly bent his eyes on the carpet, and kept silence for a moment, while a bland and satisfied expression spread over his face.

"What reason have you for thinking thus?" he said softly.

"Ah! my dear sir, I have seen much of the world, of society, I mean, and I have watched and kept my eyes open, and *that* is the conclusion I have come to."

Some unusual strain of reticence kept Aunt Clem from disclosing all her reasons.

"It may be so," remarked Kharapet thoughtfully, pressing the palms of his hands together, as though moved in some measure. "Yet what is there to gain in such a connection, whereas Stasie has a fortune—money, available money—and youth, dear lady. Ah! delightful youth."

"Very true; but I don't think Dr. Brooke cares much for money, he has enough for himself, and if he returns——"

"Ah!" broke in Kharapet with an expressive gesture. "*All* men care for money—all—all: and Harding, what does he think? does he suspect? It will bruise his pride."

"Goodness, gracious, Mr. Kharapet, you are running away with the story. I don't think there is anything for Mr. Harding to suspect. There can't be a nicer, sweeter woman than his wife. It is only the doctor who is a little, just a little fond of her, quite Platonic, you know,

and I must say *he* is very much to be liked; if he did not come in your way I should like him well enough."

This speech puzzled Kharapet a good deal. An Eastern cannot understand Platonics, but he gathered enough to make him feel that Miss Stretton's leaning towards the obnoxious doctor must in some way be rectified, so he shook his head solemnly. "Ah!" he said, "Dr. Brooke is no gentleman, or he would never use the words he did."

"What words?" cried Miss Stretton with keen curiosity.

"I do not like to repeat them," said Kharapet with soft hesitation.

"Why not, my dear sir, I am supremely safe."

"I would rather not, Miss Stretton."

"Was it anything against me. Come, I must insist."

"Perhaps, indeed, I ought to tell you. It will show you something of his real nature, which is far from refined."

"You don't say so. Now *do* tell me."

"It is in strict confidence?"



"Yes, yes, Mr. Kharapet, the strictest."

"Well, then, he called you in my hearing a talkative old cat."

An awful silence followed, and then Miss Stretton said with a little scornful laugh, "I am sure I am very much obliged to him, considering he had never met me but once, and then I did not say half-a-dozen words. Pray, how and where did he say this? I thought he went away the day after I saw him at York Gate."

"He did, but not till the evening, and I happened to meet him at a restaurant, where we both dined."

"Oh! it is really not worth noticing, only I *am* surprised that a man of Dr. Brooke's position would express himself in such a vulgar, not to say low fashion! I must say he is not a fit companion for our dear Stasie. I am sure, Mrs. Harding is welcome to her elegant cousin."

"You see you have drawn forth this statement, and now I trust myself in your hands."

"And I am sure you may! Do not be discouraged, my dear sir; the whims of young girls are unaccountable, and I daresay Stasie is even now regretting her ill-considered conduct. You

*may* leave yourself in my hands, Mr. Kharapet, I will back you up all I can."

"I have full faith in you, but I deeply regret being obliged to leave town just now ; however, I cannot offend my good and powerful patrons, but I will return as soon as I can. I fear I must bid you good-morning now, as I have a visit to pay to Mr. Harding. Oblige me by not letting Stasie know that I confided my disappointment to you ; let us gently guide her in the way she should go, and trust me. Never can I forget your faithful friendship."

. . . . .

It was late when Kharapet's interview with Mr. Harding was over, and he walked down the garden to the road, with anything but a satisfied expression. Mr. Harding was not particularly glad to see him, and though, as usual, he yielded to his colleague's wishes on sundry points, he did so with unmistakable reluctance, so that Kharapet feared unwilling co-operation might prove little different from opposition.

Reaching the road, Kharapet paused, and mused for a moment. Then, turning in an opposite direction to the railway station, walked

slowly for some hundred yards or so, not heeding the closing day nor the fact that he ran the risk of losing the last train to town.

Soon the sound of horses' feet and the laughter of children reached his ear, and he paused again, till the returning gipsy-party came up, and he was cordially greeted by its more juvenile members, for he was decidedly a favourite with Willie, Ethel, and their new play-fellow Janet.

He turned with them, walking beside the pony-carriage till they reached Sefton House, where Janet Mathews bade them good-evening, and trotted off to restore her pony to his rightful owner; Mrs. Harding was occupied with Willie, who seemed over tired, and did not press Stasie to come in, so they parted at the gate.

"I can walk back with you," said Kharapet.

"Had you not better go on quick or you will lose your train?" returned Stasie, wishing to avoid him, yet not liking visibly to decline his escort.

"I have lost it," he said, "but by walking on to Welwood I can get a later train on the chief line."

"I am sure you can have the pony-carriage. I know you are not accustomed to walking."

"I prefer it now," replied Kharapet, "and I want to speak to you."

"Oh! very well," said Stasie, seeing there was no escape, and they walked on for some minutes in silence.

"I am going away to-morrow for some weeks," began Kharapet at last, and he stopped suddenly.

"I am sure I hope you will enjoy yourself," said Stasie.

"Do you think I shall, Stasie?"

"Why not? you are going to be *fêted* and petted by all the great ladies, to see heaps of lovely things, and to eat delightful dinners, and all for nothing, not a penny to pay."

"Stasie," stepping a little in front of her and barring the way, "why do you mock me? Do you not fear that you will turn my love to hate? Take care! a little more—and—and tenderness will harden into revenge."

"Do not talk in that way, Hormuz," said Stasie, not frightened, but vexed and uncomfortable. "Why have you not the sense to see that

there is no use in it? I never can like you, love you, I mean, as you wish. I cannot tell why, you are very handsome and pleasant, and you will find plenty of girls who would be very pleased to marry you, but *I* cannot, and there's an end of it."

"But I want you, only you," whispered Kharapet, creeping close to her. "Why will you not be my wife? I would teach you to love me."

"That you would not," exclaimed Stasie with much animation. "I liked you much better before you wanted to marry me! I do not wish to marry *any* one. I wish to enjoy myself, and to be free, at least, till I am of age."

"Ha!" cried Kharapet, suddenly grasping her wrist with more force than could be expected from his slender hand. "Will you promise, solemnly, sacredly promise me not to marry until you are twenty-one? If you do, I will endure, I will be silent. Will you promise me, Stasie?"

"Indeed I will not. Why should I?" she exclaimed indignantly, and wrenching her hand from him. He had never dared so much before. "I am tolerably sure I shall not marry before I am one-and-twenty, but I promise nothing."

“No, you will not promise; you wish to deceive me. But you do not. I understand you. I know every design that forms itself in your heart; you will wed, and that soon. If, oh! foolish one, you can win that cold, stern, scornful doctor—but he cares nothing for you—his eyes and his thoughts are with another. He heeds you no more than——” he paused and struck his open palms, slanting first up then down across each other with that peculiarly Oriental gesture indicative of nothingness.

“How dare you speak to me of Dr. Brooke?” cried Stasie, panting with indignation. “Can I not speak like a lady to a gentleman without your intruding your miserable suspicions, your wretched misunderstandings, to worry and annoy me? You don’t understand English people—you never will! Do you think I cannot speak to a man without looking on him as a lover? without wanting him as a lover? He may love any one and every one but me, and yet be an agreeable companion, which *you* have not been of late! I used to like you; why do you persist in worrying me into dislike?”

“Stasie,” returned Kharapet huskily, “you

are cruel—you are very hard to me, and all because I love you too well !”

“ I am sure I wish you would not. You were far nicer when you did not.”

“ I cannot help it,” said Kharapet in a tone of despair that touched Stasie’s heart. “ And is this your last word—is there no more hope—none ?”

“ None whatever,” she returned, not unkindly ; “ and I do wish you would put all hopes and ideas about me out of your head ; then we could be friends again. I should be so pleased to be friends with you, Hormuz, but I never can while you tease me. Do be sensible.”

“ And you wish me to be content with this ?”

“ Yes, and so will you be if you make up your mind. Perhaps you will see some nice fair girl at the Saintsburys’ or at Lady Kilconquhar’s, and take a fancy to her ! and she may have money too——”

“ Be silent !” exclaimed Kharapet, vehemently, rudely. “ Why do you taunt me ? I love you for your beauty—your charm—your devilish charm which I cannot resist ! And so you would—you would have my friendship, Stasie, and nothing more ?”

“I would value it very much ; you would find me grateful,” said Stasie, more calmly than she might have done had there been light enough to show her the expression of her companion’s eyes. A deep silence ensued, which lasted till they were close at the gate of Stasie’s house, when Kharapet spoke softly in an altered voice. “I will never offend you again,” he said. “I will never speak of love to you ; I will put it out of my heart for ever.” He dwelt on the last two words. “You will forgive my offences and trust me once more ?”

“I will, indeed, and like you as much as I used,” cried Stasie cheerfully, for something in his tone struck her as being peculiarly earnest.

“Give me your hand, then.” Stasie held it out. He took and kissed it twice, a long kiss ; then letting it go, he murmured something not English.

“The few remaining steps were accomplished in silence, and at the gate they met Bhloodhoo, who explained that the “mem Sahib” had sent him to seek “missee.”

“I will say good-night, then,” said Kharapet in the same softly-subdued voice that so touched his hearer ; “and when I return, you will find



your wishes accomplished so far as I can school myself."

"Well, good-bye; and I do hope you will have a very pleasant trip," said Stasie heartily. She did not offer him her hand, but ran quickly indoor.

The Hindoo accompanied his benefactor a pace or two; they exchanged a few sentences, then, with a deep salaam, he stopped and returned to the villa.

When Stasie opened her eyes the next morning, her first thought was that Kharapet had gone away—that for a fortnight or three weeks at all events she should not see him—should not be offended and made uncomfortable by the glances she had learned to understand—by the whispers which moved her to a strange mixture of pity and disgust. Her sense of relief, too, was heightened by recalling the tone in which he had promised her to renounce and conquer the love that she found unacceptable. If he did so, she might in time feel at ease with him, but never again could she feel as she once did. Then she wondered vaguely why Kharapet—handsome, graceful, devoted as he was—should have in-

spired her with a sense of angry repulsion. She could not account for it,—she was only very certain of the impression.

She had risen and dressed while she pondered these things, and, finding she was yet early, took a book and wandered into the garden, enjoying the crisp freshness of the early autumn, and still thinking over her conversation with Kharapet.

She felt as if she had grown years older since she left school—since she had come in contact with a passion which revolted rather than flattered her; she had the instinct of a warm pure nature that feels lowered in its own esteem by words of ardent love from any save its own true mate. This Kharapet could never be, and she looked back with a half angry feeling that she should have been so rudely startled into full womanly consciousness by a creature she nearly hated, and certainly despised. “Yet I am most ungrateful,” she argued with herself. “Because Hormuz does not suit my fancy, am I to dislike him when he has really been good to me? As to his being greedy about money, I suppose he has never had a chance of knowing anything but money making. I am sure Mr. Harding is as

bad, and I have not the same feeling about him."

Meanwhile there was one point of last evening's talk from which Stasie tried to turn her thoughts, but it would come and place itself clear and distinct before her mental vision. This was the assertion made by Kharapet, with scarce suppressed fury, that she (Stasie) was ready to wed *if* she could win Dr. Brooke, but that he was utterly indifferent to her. How was it he dared to say this? or rather how came he to think it? She well remembered the bitter mortification with which she attributed Brooke's change of manner towards herself to a wish to show her there was no use in falling in love with him. Was it possible that her conduct had given the same impression to Kharapet? If so, appearance must have gone far beyond reality; and yet she knew in her heart what a charm Dr. Brooke's conversation, manner, voice, had for her; how unconsciously she had grown to look for his coming—to feel that he took an interest in her. Yes, blushing there alone in the still fresh morning, she acknowledged that she could have loved him well, *if* so superior a being would have

deigned to care for a half-educated schoolgirl like herself; as it was, she did not of course. No; he might be far above her as an archangel, yet she would not give her heart unasked. Foolish child! she little thought it had gone from her,—not perhaps irrevocably,—yet never again would any other make quite the same impression.

She certainly would like to know who that "other" was with whom, according to Kharapet, his eyes and thoughts were occupied; but this was folly—she would not dwell on the idea in any way. She tried to fix her mind on her book, but, finding this of no avail, and observing the new factotum at work in the kitchen garden, she strolled away to talk to him.

After bidding him good-morning, Stasie stood for a moment watching him weed the bed on which he was engaged, and then said:

"Mr. Kharapet tells me you were in the service of the Consul at Mardīn?"

"Yes, missee! I served the 'Bourra Sahib,' your good second father."

"How long were you with him?"

"Five, six—eight years. I mind you very much at the big house, one little missee baba!

and you was the apple of the eye of the old man. He did plenty cry when you leave him to go with Padre Sahib to this country."

"I cannot remember you, Bhoodhoo; I only remember my nurse."

"She was a very good ayah—big black woman, went away too with you."

"Why did you leave my father?"

"A great travelling gentleman who liked my khabobs and curries, my helwa and féziljan; he ask the Bourra Sahib to let me go with him to Bombay. I like to go back to my country. Then bad man he steal my few pice; then I go for cook on one great big ship, and cross the black water—got sick in London, got no money, meet Kharapet Sahib, he speak to me in my own language; he very good to me; then brought me to you."

"And are you content to stay in our quiet house?"

"Yes, missee, I like it much; you all very good; like to be in same house with daughter of old master! I will serve her well, and make her many nice things to eat."

"I wish you would make me some helwa; I

**like** it very much, and currie. I have not tasted **currie** for a long time."

"I can make them good—very good."

"Very well, Bhoodhoo. Is it not dark and **cold** in this country?"

"It makes more cold and black to have no **Pice** and to be with strangers. You not stranger **to me**. I mind you very little baba, and it do **me** plenty good to serve the same little child, **now** one beautiful mem Sahib."

"I am very pleased to have you here, Bhoodhoo. If you serve me well, I shall not forget to **reward** you."

"Missee Sahib will be pleased with me, I have **no fear**."

Here the conversation was interrupted by Janet Mathews, who came quickly from the house, letters in her hands and tears in her eyes.

"Here is a letter for you Stasie from mother, and I have one too. She says I must really go home next week. The classes have begun, and she is sure you have had enough of me."

"Indeed, I have not," said Stasie kindly, and, putting her arm over Janet's shoulder, turned with her towards the open window of the

drawing-room. "What does Mrs. Mathews say?"

"Oh, she writes in excellent spirits. Ella has got her house nearly finished, and mother has a new boarder at the full price, and Atty is getting on ever so much better than he ever did before; but I wish I could stay only a little while longer, only I fancy mother really wants me. What does she say in your letter, Stasie?"

Stasie opened and looked through it.

"Very much the same as in yours, dear. She evidently *does* want you at home. Mary is too young to be of much use. How glad I am that Ella is so happy and comfortable! Well, Janet, you certainly shall not go till after the school feast, then I think I must let you return. Is Aunt Clem in the breakfast-room?"

"Not yet, but I heard her calling Mary, so I suppose breakfast is ready."

"Let us come in, then."



## CHAPTER VIII.

THOUGH London, at least that part of it which may be termed "clubland," was a desert, Brooke did not hurry away to the enjoyments offered him in the north. His journey would keep for a week he thought, especially as he received an invitation from his friend Robinson to join in the rustic festivities which were to be held at the rectory, and to dine with him after. Brooke, very willing to visit Sefton Park on any pretext, readily accepted, and found himself thinking the intervening days uncommonly long.

The anticipated day was dull, oppressive, and threatening. Nevertheless, Brooke found the little station at Sefton Park quite gay and animated, as most of the owners of the "Houses," "Villas," and cottages in the lower portions of the Park had made holiday and invited guests from town. On reaching the parsonage he found



that the young incumbent had already gone to the scene of action, but left word that Mr. Harding would not probably go till later.

At Sefton House, accordingly, he found the mistress waiting for him, and in the porch reading. She told him the children had gone on with Mademoiselle, as they were too full of assisting at Stasie's table to have any patience. And, having administered a biscuit and a glass of sherry to her guest, they set out together.

"Be sure you have everything ready for your master's dinner," said Mrs. Harding to the servant as they left the house. "He may return early, and you must not think of leaving the house until he has dined. Susan shall return about five, and then cook may come, and you as soon as your master has been served. I fancy there will be some dancing as late as half-past six. I will not stay much later than five o'clock myself."

"Very well'm," returned Jane, but she did not look well pleased.

"I see you spoil your husband as much as ever," observed Brooke, as they walked leisurely along under the arching boughs of the big elms,

between which the evening sunshine pierced, lying in broad streaks of golden light across the grassy sides and gray roadway of the avenue.

"After all these years I am not likely to change my system," she replied. "Besides, it is, fear, too late; but I wish he had consented either to stay here and join us or dine in town."

"Take my advice—do not return until late; let him take care of himself for once; he can join you if he likes."

"But he will be so cross and say disagreeable things, and——"

"Let him for once. Make a stand. It riles me frightfully to see you enslaved in this way. He could forgive him a good deal if he could not bear you out of his sight; but you say his motive is different."

"Oh," said Mrs. Harding, laughing, "I do not matter myself that my society gives him the lightest pleasure, but I always try to keep the peace."

"To secure which it is necessary to be well armed. Believe me, Livy, excessive yielding is just as fatal to peace as excessive opposition.

Make a stand this evening ; I'll back you up—you risk nothing."

"I feel half tempted to try—but hark! What a fearful amount of big-drumming—the *fête* seems in full swing."

They had reached a sudden bend in the avenue, where it descended a steep incline, and a small turnstile admitted to a path across a couple of the rector's fields which led to a pretty byroad debouching on the old, gray, ivy-grown parish church and the entrance to the rectory. The gate stood hospitably open ; the lodge was deserted, so Mrs. Harding and Brooke walked up to the house unquestioned.

The approach between large old laurels was short, and on reaching the entrance a large grassy space, shaded by fine trees and bordered by flower-beds, was discernible beyond a farther angle of the comfortable homely mansion.

Here a long table, decorated with fruit and flowers, was spread for special guests.

Guiding her companion round to the back front of the house, Mrs. Harding paused to look at the scene presented by a large field dotted with one or two groups of trees, and separated

from the pleasure-ground by a sunk fence, bridged at one side for the occasion by a temporary planking.

To the left, near the sunk fence, was a large tent. One side was open, displaying three long tables, which were crowded with boys and girls of all ages, from two years old and upwards, while the clatter of plates, the busy hum of voices, the various smart young ladies and clerical-looking young men flitting to and fro with sugar and milk, jugs of tea, and baskets full of buns, showed that the feast was at its height. Still a large contingent of the holiday-makers were "playing blind-man's-buff" and "thread the needle," besides occupying a couple of swings, which were surrounded with clamorous groups.

On a broad gravelled walk before the windows of the drawing and dining rooms were two rows of chairs for the dignified spectators, among whom Mrs. Harding found a few acquaintances, when she had presented Brooke to Mrs. Dale, the rector's wife, who was a little querulous about the innovations of modern fashion. "Yes, yes, it is all very fine to see them amusing themselves; but when we came here first no one ever

thought of such things; nobody wanted them, and we did just as well without them."

Leaving Mrs. Harding to play audience, Brooke strolled away across the foot-bridge and into the tent, where he was soon pounced upon by Willie. "Oh, Dr. Brooke! do come over to our side. Come and help me—Stasie has given me five little children to wait upon, and they have eaten twenty-seven buns already, and I have spilt nearly a whole cup of tea up my sleeve; it is so uncomfortable."

"I should think it was. Where is Miss Verner?"

"Just at the end, near Aunt Clem. Aunt Clem is pouring out tea, only she doesn't do much. She has Bhoo dhoo to help her. See! there's Bhoo dhoo—no, he's gone. He has his best things on,—his sash and his embroidered cap,—and he looks quite grand!"

By the time Willie had uttered all this very volubly, they had managed to make their way to the head of a table where Miss Stretton was enthroned in a state of beatitude, attired in lavender silk and black lace, with the obsequious Bhoo dhoo at her orders, and an elegant, digni-

ed, fresh-coloured portly divine, held in animated and interesting conversation behind her chair, while a large vessel of the tea-urn order, over which she was supposed to preside, was left neglected, its tap at the mercy of all who chose to turn it.

“Oh, Dr. Brooke! how do you do?” cried Estie, who was holding a large jug to be replenished from the above-mentioned vessel. “Take care, or I may scald you! We are tremendously busy.

“So I see! Can I help you?”

“Yes! Just take this tea, and fill the cups down this side. Janet and I can take the milk and sugar.”

Brooke readily obeyed, and was not a little amused by the whole scene. The intense eagerness of the children to cram as much cake and swallow as many cups of tea as possible in the time allowed, as they were fed in relays; the sudden demureness as soon as any of the young ladies, Sunday-school teachers, or curates came near, and the outburst of giggles, pinchings, and grabbings directly that pressure was removed. The grace and elegance of some of the genteel

servitors, the business-like attention of other notably Janet Mathews. Stasie was the busiest there, with pleasant words and kind attention for the old grannies, who were brought to balance the juveniles, and who seemed to enjoy themselves the most of the two.

At last the intensity of demand and supply relaxed; and Stasie, pausing from her efforts leant against one of the tent-poles and fanned herself, while Miss Stretton's clerical friend proposed a hymn of thanksgiving, collected the children, and started the tune himself in a very fair tenor voice. His call was eagerly responded to, a noise being always acceptable to the young, and soon a chorus, loud and shrill, if not harmonious, rang out, startling those conservatives, the rooks, who showed their displeasure by sailing away in a floating phalanx towards the quiet country farther west.

But the claimants for tea and buns began to diminish and sink into a mere dribble of greedy boys seeking for more, and soon the attendants began to clear away the *débris*.

"You have done your duty like a Briton, Miss Verner," said Brooke, who had walked round

long the holiday-makers, with Willie for a while, and now returned. "You must be tired. Come and sit down in the garden. I believe Mr. Harding is there."

"I have not seen her all day," said Stasie. "Do you know if Mr. Harding came back early?"

"No. At least I heard his wife giving very special instructions respecting his reception when *did* return."

Stasie shrugged her shoulders expressively, but said nothing. She looked pale and thoughtful, and Brooke was aware of a very strong desire to make her talk. He was dimly conscious of some change in her, towards himself especially, which roused his curiosity and interest.

"Where is your picturesque friend, Mr. Khamet?" he asked. "He would have been a great addition to such a gathering as this, and it would have been quite in his line too."

"He is not in town," she returned; "he has come to pay some visits in the country. I do not think he would care for a school feast. It really takes a long time to understand the great difference of idea and feeling between an Eastern and ourselves. Hormuz certainly understands



English perfectly, and speaks it as well as I do, I daresay more grammatically; yet I am quite sure when I talk to him of plans and—and the future, and my own fancies, I speak an unknown tongue.”

“I have no doubt you do. Hollo! what’s the matter?”—this to a wee toddler of three or four, who, hurrying to overtake some elder play-fellows, stumbled, fell, and, finding his retreat cut off by strangers, set up a howl of dismay.

“Poor little soul! he is frightened,” said Stasie, stooping to pick him up. “Where are your schoolfellows?”

“I want Sally,” sobbed the child; “I want Sally!”

“Come, we will go and look for her,” said Stasie kindly; “and if you stop crying I will give you a nice sweetie.”

The urchin listened to the voice of the charmer, and opened his mouth. Stasie took a *bonbonnière* from her pocket, from which she extracted a morsel of thick whitish paste, and popped it into the expectant jaws.

“Is that good?” she asked. But the consoled one made no sign, and Stasie was about to renew

position to seek for Sally, when a stout  
a straw hat and fiery pink ribbons came  
up.

h, Dicky! you naughty boy! I thought  
are lost. What are you eating?"

nly a sweetie I comforted him with. Do  
se sight of him again," said Stasie. "He  
eadfully frightened."

h! thank you, miss, thank you! Make a  
the lady, Dick!" But Dick was impene-

He clung to Sally, and hid his face in  
ock, as she led him away.

What a fine little savage!" said Brooke  
ng, "though not grateful."

nd the sweetie was very good. Will you  
some? Perhaps you have tasted this kind  
ng before. It is a Baghdad or Mardin  
almost the only thing I remember in  
,

oke took a piece, and after a few seconds  
l, "No, I never met anything like this. It  
good. Where do you get it?"

hoodhoo makes it for me and for the little  
ngs; they are very fond of helwa."

ile talking thus they crossed the plank

which led to the pleasure-ground, and found the children of the neighbouring gentry arranging themselves for a country-dance, which Mrs. Harding was assisting to organise.

"Do look at Ethel shaking out her skirts," said Stasie laughing; "she is such a little coquette."

"I believe she is. She will be charming. For my part, I like coquettes; they stir the pool of life."

"But not a real coquette," said Stasie, opening her large eyes—"a cold heartless coquette?"

"No; not a monster of loveliness and cruelty—such as you meet in the penny dreadfuls," returned Brooke, laughing. "I fancy a man must be wanting in observation if a coquette takes him in long; but they had better make haste and get their dance over, for the rain is coming at last, or I am very much mistaken."

Stasie and her cavalier had strolled along under some wide-spreading elms which shaded the stretch of grass where the dancers were collected, and where, almost out of sight themselves, they could see the general company. As

she made no reply Brooke turned to look at his companion, but at the same moment she caught his arm and suddenly tottered against him, while her eyes were half closed, and one hand was outstretched as if groping in the dark.

"You are ill," exclaimed Brooke, putting his arm round her.

She was silent, and her head fell against his breast. She was not insensible—for her lips moved, but no sound came from them. Brooke looked hastily round; a seat was near, he lifted her to it, intending to call Mrs. Harding when she had placed her there, but, with a long shivering sigh, she seemed to come to herself, turning her eyes slowly on him with a puzzled look, and trembling violently.

Still holding his arm with one hand, she passed the other over her brow. "What is the matter?" she asked, in a low thick voice.

"You are overdone with heat and fatigue, I imagine," said Brooke, looking anxiously at her.

If I could leave you I would get you a glass of water."

"Don't leave me," said Stasie, still as if with difficulty. "I am better." She sighed deeply

and pressed her hand on her heart, letting Brooke's arm go to do so. He was quite still and silent, watching her while she slowly tried to untie the lace handkerchief round her throat; gradually the pallor of her face grew a little less death-like, and again she sighed as if oppressed; but she was now quite herself, though she spoke slowly and her voice sounded weak.

"What could it have been?" she asked, with a wondering look at her companion. "I was not so very tired or overcome with heat; and I am always well. I never had anything the matter with me. When the Mathews children had measles and scarlatina I never took either, though I helped to nurse them."

"Some slight changes in your system of life, your diet—it is hard to say what without some examination—might cause such an attack," said Brooke, who saw she was a little alarmed; "in digestion might have such results."

"I have not eaten much to-day," replied Stasie. "It was a horrible feeling; every thing seemed suddenly to grow so indistinct, as if waving to and fro. I felt that for a minute or two, and then my heart beat as if it would burst;

; was horrible." She paused. "There; I am much better, and I will not think any more about it, but I will find Aunt Clem. I should like to go home."

"Wait," said Brooke, who was more impressed by Stasie's sudden seizure than he wished her to perceive. "Don't try to walk just yet; you will be all right in a few minutes. I can see Miss Stretton—away there by the house; he is in deep conversation with the rector. I can bring her to you in a moment."

"I would rather not, thank you; she would make a dreadful fuss. I am nearly well, and I shall just steal away by myself; then you can tell Mrs. Harding."

"You shall not walk home alone," said Brooke decidedly. "I will go with you."

"Very well," replied Stasie quietly; "but when I reach home I shall find no one in the house. We had better tell Mrs. Harding."

Brooke was conscious of a strong desire to take charge of her himself away from all interference.

The magic of contact, the unconscious grace of her attitude as she leant helplessly against

him, the natural fear with which she tried to keep him beside her—all seemed to give sudden life to the fire that had long smouldered in his heart, almost unknown to himself. He recognised not only that she was sweet and fair,—a most excellent specimen of youthful womanhood,—but that she had for him the subtle mysterious individual charm, which made her the one thing needful to his life. All this came to him in a flash of instantaneous revelation, and he as instantly strove to master the impression, smiling in his own mind at such boyish folly.

But this swift wave of sensation passing over the electric “chain with which we are darkly bound” made no difference in his quiet grave kindliness of manner. “Shall I bring Mrs. Harding to you?”

“Oh, no! I can walk to her quite well, and presently I will ask Mary—one of our servants—to come back and stay with me.”

“I will go with you to your house,” replied Brooke; “and let me beg of you, Miss Verner, to take medical advice; some very slight remedial measure may save you from a repetition.”

“Oh, yes! I will see Dr. Hunter,” inter-

rupted Stasie, hastily, as if she feared to allow him to finish his sentence. "He is such a nice dear old man ; he has done Janet so much good."

"Don't be afraid ; I shall not insist upon prescribing for you," said Brooke, smiling.

"Oh, I did not mean *that*," exclaimed Stasie, now speaking in her natural voice. "You are having your holiday, and it would be too bad to make you work ;" and she coloured up, looking quite like herself.

"Ah ! Miss Verner, that is all very well, but you evidently have no faith in my skill."

"I trust I shall not want much of any one's skill. I feel so much better that I am already ashamed of the fuss I made," looking shyly into Brooke's eyes.

"You were a little frightened. Eh, Miss Verner ? but I don't think you made much fuss."

"I am all right now, at any rate," cried Stasie. "I begin to forget I felt so ill."

"Do not forget to consult your favourite doctor however. Are you quite equal to go and look for Mrs. Harding ?"

"Oh ! quite, quite ; but I do hope I shall not feel that horrible sensation again."



"I daresay a little care will prevent its return," said Brooke cheerfully. "Are you sure you feel equal to walking?"

"Yes, quite sure, though I feel a little dazed and giddy." She rose as she spoke, and walked steadily, though slowly, back to the house, while Brooke watched her with a new interest.

"Where have you been, Stasie; and what is the matter, dear? You look ill."

Stasie gave a slight description of her faintness, and said she would like to return home.

"I will go with you," said Mrs. Harding. "I have had enough of the *fête*, and the children are quite safe with Mademoiselle. I must tell Miss Stretton, however."





## CHAPTER IX.


school feast had brought Miss Stretton  
ng but unalloyed pleasure. She had been  
d with the utmost consideration ; dignified  
es had bestowed much conversation upon  
he had been given a seat among the mag-  
of the neighbourhood, while she saw many  
r acquaintances from the park wandering  
ded among the promiscuous multitude.  
ese privileges disposed her to remain where  
was, though on hearing Mrs. Harding's  
nt of Stasie's indisposition she immediately  
sed to accompany her niece home. It  
ot difficult, however, to convince her that  
ad better stay where she was, as Mrs. Hard-  
ished to leave on her own account, and it  
l be unkind to take Janet away in the height  
: enjoyment ; moreover, the shades of night  
l soon be closing, and then all must retire.

The Rev. St. John Robinson, disentangling himself from a group of the younger children, whom he was assisting to play oranges and lemons, came up hastily to beg Miss Stretton not to leave, as some hymns were to be sung before the party broke up, which he thought would please her. He was much concerned to hear Miss Verner had been so unwell. It was such a pity she was obliged to go, etc. "I shall be at the parsonage by seven o'clock," he said earnestly, aside to Brooke. "You will wait if you arrive before me, and there is to be a train as late as nine-thirty this evening, so we can have a quiet talk."

Brooke assented, and then hastened to overtake Stasie and Mrs. Harding, who were walking slowly towards home across the fields.

Stasie, always affirming that she felt quite well, quite herself, was very quiet and silent, while Mrs. Harding and her cousin talked pleasantly on many topics, the latter watching the fair invalid from time to time with keen but unobtrusive attention.

On approaching Sefton House they perceived Mr. Harding and another gentleman strolling



to and fro in the garden as they enjoyed their cigars.

"Who can Mr. Harding have brought with him?" exclaimed Mrs. Harding. "It is most unusual for him to find unexpected guests."

"I think," said Stasie, raising her head, "it looks like young Mr. Pearson."

"It cannot be," said Mrs. Harding greatly surprised. But further speech was cut short by Mr. Harding and his companion advancing to meet them, when Stasie's conjecture proved to be right.

"Ah! here you are; I scarcely expected you so soon," cried Mr. Harding, who seemed to be in an excellent humour. "It is fortunate I came home in good time, or our friend here, Mr. Pearson, would have had his ride for nothing."

Upon this salutations were exchanged. Young Pearson was looking bright and *debonnaire*. He was admirably dressed. A mixture of boyish frank gaiety and soldierly *à plomb* gave a charm to his manner, and made him a general favourite.

Stasie was quite pleased to see him. He brought an atmosphere of healthy joyous youth with him that was peculiarly acceptable to her.

"Did you ride all the way from London?" she asked, when, having shaken hands with Mrs. Harding, he passed on to her.

"Oh, no. I came over from Hounslow. We are quartered there, about five or six miles off. I only returned last Saturday. I have been staying with my people in the Highlands—nice place—rather sorry to leave, though it is great luck to be sent to Hounslow."

"Is it?" said Stasie; but Mr. Pearson was shaking hands with Brooke, and Mr. Harding was saying, "I suppose you are glad enough to get away from the row; we could hear the big drum here. Where are Miss Stretton and the children?"

Mrs. Harding explained that Stasie had been overcome by the oppressiveness of the weather, by the heat of the tent, or the fatigue of helping so many, and felt faint, so faint that had not Dr. Brooke been beside her she would have fallen.

"Ha! that was well managed, Stasie," cried Mr. Harding with rough jocularly, "to have the doctor beside you. A strapping fellow too, able to hold you up."

"Oh, I did not want much holding up," she

turned wearily. "The feeling soon passed away; but I should like to lie down and rest now."

"Will you come to my room then?" asked Mrs. Harding.

"No, dear, thank you, I should like to go home. Aunt Clem said she would send Mary back."

"Oh, nonsense," said Mr. Harding. "You are all right now. You stay and dine. Mr. Pearson has promised to wait for dinner. I suppose Madame has something for us to eat? And," with a little hesitation, "Dr. Brooke, I hope you will stay also."

"Thank you, I am engaged to Mr. Robinson."

"And indeed I had better go home," said Stasie. "I do not feel as if I could speak a word; you will be better without me."

"*That* I cannot believe," said Pearson with a frown.

"Now, Stasie, I'd give long odds that if the doctor stayed you would," cried Mr. Harding. "Come, doctor, change your mind, and persuade our patient to do likewise."

Stasie was very vexed at this rude speech,

but though still feeling dazed, she collected sufficiently to say, "I should be very pleased to dine with Dr. Brooke and all of you, but I do not feel equal to it."

"I am so sorry, Miss Verner," said Mr. Pearson. "You ought not to have overdone it, attending to those brats. If you will allow me to call, I will ride over the day after to-morrow to ask how you are going on."

"I will not press you, Stasie," said Mrs. Harding, "for you would be better lying down in the dark; but I will walk with you to your house."

The whole party therefore moved on, Stasie between Mrs. Harding and Pearson, and Dr. Brooke with Mr. Harding. "Have a cigar, doctor?" he asked after a pause, a question he rarely put, giving not being one of his weaknesses. Brooke accepted and struck a light in silence. "I never was so surprised," continued Harding, "as when young Pearson turned up just now. By George! I could hardly make him out. He seems to have taken a sudden liking to Mrs. Harding and myself. Lord! doctor, it is easy to see his little game; he is

going in for the heiress. It will be as good as a play to see Kharapet's face when he comes back. Of course I am disposed to be on Kharapet's side ; but that young Pearson would be a very suitable match, good-looking, well off (*may* be rich if the general does not go into too many companies), young, and taking. I don't think Kharapet would have a chance with him, only Stasie Verner has her crotchets, and is obstinate, devilish obstinate about them. I do think Kharapet is really far gone about her, independent of the money."

"I fancy your Eastern friend might overlook the charms, or want of charms in a bride, provided he secured the needful !"

"You are right ! He would have married a Hottentot venus, but finding a deuced handsome girl attached to the cash made him wild to secure both. I don't mean to say that he hasn't a chance, but I am inclined to think it isn't much of a one."

Brooke smoked for a few moments in silence, a whole regiment of unwelcome ideas having been evoked by Mr. Harding's remarks. Kharapet had, he felt sure, no chance with a girl like



Stasie Verner, though he was capable of trying every means, honest or dishonest, to obtain her and hers ; but the gay, gallant young lancer might take any girl's fancy. Brooke's heart sank while he looked after the graceful well-set-up soldierly figure, as he could not have dreamed it would when he started that morning. What a doubtful good money was to a girl ! Here were a set of sharpers, or little better, trying to snap up a diamond of purest water for the sake of the setting.

"I presume," he said at last, impelled by an irresistible desire to draw Mr. Harding into further talk on this interesting topic. "I presume you would prefer the young lady to marry an Englishman."

"I don't know," replied Harding cautiously. "Kharapet is not a bad fellow, and quite Europeanised. He is desperate fond of her, and he will be sure to take care of her property. He looks on it already as his own, for if Stasie were out of the way of course it would be. He will be in a devil of a temper if she won't marry him, and she might do worse. He is hand and glove with the swells. He ain't bad-looking. Once

married, I suppose one man is about as good as another."

"I don't suppose you would like your wife to take that view of the subject?"

"My wife. Oh! that's another matter! She knows I picked her out for herself alone when I might have had a fortune, I dare say, for the asking. She *ought* to think me A1, but she and Stasie are a pair, they both have crotchets. I never thought two women would stick so close to each other."

"Ah! possibly there are depths in feminine nature you have not fathomed."

"Very likely," returned Harding with a vague irritating sense of being sneered at. "I have had other fish to fry, and leave it to parsons and doctors, who find it pay probably to sound the depths you talk about!"

Perceiving that his companion was nettled, Dr. Brooke laughed good-humouredly. "Yes, I dare say we find our account in ministering to the delicate maladies of our fair patients."

"Well, what a heap of humbug goes to grease the wheels of every profession. By George! I begin to think trade is the honestest of the lot."

"It has great capabilities for the other thing, however," returned Brooke.

"Perhaps so—perhaps so," said Harding carelessly; but Mrs. Harding had now paused at the gate of Limeville, and Stasie was bidding Mr. Pearson good-evening.

"Good-bye, Jim," said Mrs. Harding to her cousin. I am going in with Stasie, and shall not see you again. Come back soon."

"I shall," he returned. "I shall come to-morrow to ask how Miss Verner goes on. I depend on *you* to call in the local doctor; a seizure of this kind may be nothing, and may indicate the necessity for careful treatment. Besides, I am going to Scotland for a week or two on Thursday. I am half sorry I said I would go."

"Oh! thank you!" exclaimed Stasie. "I am quite well; there is nothing really the matter with me! only that tent was so hot and airless."

"You ought not to be so careless of yourself, Miss Verner!" said the lancer sagely. "Good people are scarce; it would not be so easy to replace you!"

"In short, when Nature moulded *me*, she

broke the die, eh, Mr. Pearson?" said Stasie, laughing.

He murmured a reply, which Brooke did not hear, and then with a general good-night Stasie went into the house.

"You will attend to what I say, will you not?" were Brooke's last words to his cousin, as he turned and walked on to St. Monica's parsonage.

But the parson had not yet arrived, so the severe Amazonian female, who had received Brooke a few hours before, ushered him into a nondescript apartment—half study, half drawing-room—not uncomfortable though poorly furnished. A horse-hair sofa was embellished by a couple of splendidly-embroidered luxurious-looking velvet and satin cushions, every chair had a more or less elaborately-worked anti-macassar; and before the fireplace stretched a fender-stool, elegantly adorned with a pattern of blue and white beads on a crimson cloth ground. The window-curtains of chintz were scanty, but a bright though small fire, and a few autumnal flowers in a glass on the chimney-piece, gave a pleasant aspect to the room. The evening,

though oppressive, was damp, and the long threatening rain had begun to fall in a fine misty drizzle.

"If you'll take a seat, sir, my master will be here very soon. Daylight is nearly over, and they can't keep it up much longer. I'll light the gas if you like."

"No, thank you ; there is no need," returned Brooke, throwing himself into a chair, for he felt weary—unaccountably weary. It was quite true, as he had said to Mrs. Harding, he was sorry he had promised to go to Scotland. He would much rather have migrated to Sefton Park to watch—what ? He scarcely knew. The growth of an attachment which was in every way probable, suitable, and natural, between Stasie and young Pearson ? Why did the idea haunt him ? Was it possible that this young half-educated school-girl had so impressed herself on his fancy,—his imagination, his heart,—that it gave him a keen sense of annoyance to contemplate her probable marriage with another ? He fell into a kind of nightmare-like reverie, from which he was roused by the entrance of his friend.

"Ah, Brooke, have you been sitting here long

in the dusk ? I was obliged to stay to the last. It's all over now, and I'm not sorry. I am dead beat. Everything has gone off very well, but it's hard work" (hunting about for the matches). "The fattest, heaviest girls all insisted on swinging, and I had to swing them ; and the little ones had a way of falling off the merry-go-rounds quite wonderful ; my back ached picking them up. One little fellow nearly broke his arm, and his mother abused me vehemently. Come, you will like to wash your hands. I have a spacious house, but only four rooms furnished ; in fact the first steps in life are very costly. I was fortunate, however, to attain my present position so early. It is a great thing to have a church of one's own ; and though the rector, Mr. Dale, is quite old-fashioned in his ideas, he is glad of my help, and not averse to my influence, especially as I am quite independent of him."

And the young clergyman talked on as he conducted Brooke to his room, which had a bare barrack-like aspect. He was quite excited by the unusual pleasure of having a guest, and that guest his old and favourite schoolfellow.

"The dinner will be quite ready, sir, in twenty

minutes," said the grim female before mentioned, her head appearing above the kitchen stair. "I would not put down the steak till you were safe in the house."

"Oh thank you, Mrs. Harris," said Robinson deferentially; "whenever you are ready we are." (To Brooke) "Most excellent person that cook of mine; my aunt, Mrs. Williams, placed her with me—she is quite invaluable, but a little short tempered."

"Then the Mr. Williams, who appears to be the presiding genius of Sefton Park, is some relation of yours?" asked Brooke, when they returned to the study.

"Yes, he is my cousin. His mother was my father's eldest sister. She has been really a very good friend to me. She is very well off, and naturally has a good deal of influence with her son, so she made him speak to the directors, and he got me this church. The emoluments are small, but they have given me this house, which is really quite a mansion; it is not as thoroughly well built as might be wished, and I am obliged to keep it in repair."

"I fancy they get nearly as much out of you

as they give," said Brooke. "That cousin of yours evidently wishes to catch all the floating talent he can, and attach it to his rising colony. He wanted *me* to settle here and create a practice."

"Did he?" cried Robinson, laughing. I am afraid that would have been but a poor look-out. It is a most healthy locality and scarcely needs a physician; now, healthy or not, a "curer of souls" is always needed, so there is more room for me than for you, Brooke."

"I cannot say Sefton Park has much temptation for me; indeed, I am strongly inclined to return to my regiment."

"I daresay life is pleasant enough there; yet if you return you will never be anything else but a military surgeon."

"True——"

"The dinner's ready," said, or rather snapped, Mrs. Harris, and Brooke did not finish his sentence. He followed his host into a very small room behind the study, which boasted little more than a table and chairs.

"You see I should feel quite lost in the real dining-room," said the young clergyman; "twenty people could dine there comfortably, and I often



dine out, especially in summer when the Hardings are here ; and this year Miss Stretton and Miss Verner, with Mr. Kharapet coming to and fro, make it quite lively."

The dinner, though very simple, was remarkably well cooked and served. Brooke was inwardly amused at the extreme politeness of the incumbent to his handmaid—he seemed quite grateful to her for cooking the dinner and putting it on the table, and anything like an order was generally prefaced with "Don't you think, Mrs. Harris," etc. etc.

When the meal was over and they returned to the study, the host said, "I know you would like a cigar—pray don't mind smoking ; you will excuse me, it does not suit my cloth to be altogether as other men, but——" he paused.

"Come, Robinson, you don't mean to say that because you are a parson you must never indulge in a weed ? Why, it is a most harmless bit of worldliness."

"Yes, I know ; but you see my congregation have rather strict ideas, and—would you mind closing the shutters, Mrs. Harris ?" as that individual appeared with the tea-tray. "I daresay the Morrisons are watching our shadows on the blind."

“There are three faces flat agen the windy-panes opposite,” remarked Mrs. Harris in a deep, harsh, solemn voice, as she drew up the blind to fasten the latch.

“Well, well, shut them out,” said Robinson. “Really it is rather hard to have the inconveniences of town and country both.”

“You may say so,” said Mrs. Harris emphatically, as she retired.

“After all,” said Brooke, having lit his cigar, “I am not sure that Sefton Park is so healthy as to suit every one. Miss Verner, for instance,—she seemed to me when I first met her the incarnation of sound health, and I do not imagine she would have nearly fainted as she did to-day had she not been in a locality that in some way depressed her system. I don’t understand it.”

“Was she really almost gone?”

“Very nearly. She soon recovered, but——” Brooke paused.

“She did a great deal both in preparing for the feast and helping at it. It may have been over fatigue; she is always very good in helping, whether the poor or the sick, and I do not fancy she has much command of money, but she cer-

tainly has not a devotional spirit. She never comes to early service or any of the week-day services. Her aunt again has a great deal of piety ; she would gladly attend all our services, but she is physically unequal to the exertion at that hour of the morning."

"Oh, indeed !"

"Mr. Kharapet, their great friend, is really a very interesting fellow. He is most anxious to inform himself as to the doctrines and practice of the Church of England. He is learned, too, in his way, and has more than once passed the night down here at Miss Stretton's in order to attend matins at seven o'clock. He always puts up at Miss Stretton's ; he is her prime councillor."

"I know that," said Brooke, taking the cigar from his lips, and letting the blue smoke curl upwards. "Now tell me, Robby, have you seen much of this man, and what do you think of him, apart from his taste for your morning service?"

"I understand the sneer, Brooke," said the young clergyman good-humouredly. "Well, so far as I have been able to observe, I think he is a very worthy man, anxious to ascertain the truth, but cautious, and not too ready to jump to a con-

clusion. I have found it interesting to discuss some portions of the Old Testament with him. He knows Hebrew, and is of course at home in Syriac. He has certainly thrown new light upon some passages in the Prophet Isaiah."

"Then, you think him a sincere believer?"

"Yes, I do," with hesitation. "He says little about his beliefs or opinions, but he is anxious to be instructed in Anglican doctrine, and would gladly see some link established between the Nestorian and our own Church."

"He is a prime favourite with the Saintsbury set."

"I know!" cried Mr. Robinson eagerly. "They got hold of him first. I cannot help imagining that had he fallen in with the orthodox party he would have been more favourably impressed. He is much pleased by the service even in that temporary metal erection."

"Suppose, Robby, you had a sister," began Brooke after a pause.

"I have," returned his friend.

"Well, would you let your sister marry Kharapet?"

"I don't think I should object. He always

has been a Christian, has been duly baptized, and is, I believe, very respectable,—nay, estimable. His manners are excellent; he is received into the best society, and will, I am inclined to think, develop into a sound churchman.”

Brooke, with his little finger, flicked the ash contemptuously off his cigar. “I suppose you may be right. I know nothing against the man, but I have an invincible objection to him. I believe him to be—well, there is no use in airing my prejudices. Come, tell me something about yourself and your prospects, old fellow. You are infinitely too good to be pottering about here among a lot of pious women, young and old. You ought to have more stirring work to do.”

“I am satisfied,” said Robinson with a slight sigh. “I am most worthily employed when doing the work given to me with all my might.”

“That is sound doctrine at any rate,” returned Brooke thoughtfully, and the old acquaintances began to talk of past experiences and future hopes, time passing so rapidly that Brooke very nearly lost his train.



## CHAPTER X.

MRS. HARDING was faithful to her promise, and sent for the local doctor, more in obedience to Brooke's injunction than from any apprehensions of her own. It was not to be wondered at that heat and fatigue together had been too much for Stasie ; and as she had hitherto been always perfectly well, any little indisposition was unlooked for and startling.

Stasie herself, though declaring she was quite right, and felt no remnant of weakness, was evidently not averse to see Dr. Hunter, whose advice had, she thought, already done Janet Mathews so much good.

Miss Stretton was much exercised respecting her niece. She was deeply concerned and warmly sympathetic, but, though she would have angrily denied the imputation, if anything could have made her happier than she was at

present, it would have been the necessity, or even the imaginary necessity, of dosing, watching, regulating, and coddling Stasie on the plea of delicate health.

The doctor's verdict, however, was comforting. "There isn't much the matter, Miss Verner—pulse a little irregular, and general condition low. We must build you up. Did not sleep very well last night, you say? Ha! you generally sleep sound, I presume?"

"Oh yes! I never wake from the time I lay my head on the pillow till Susan rouses me; but the last three or four nights I have woke up often, though I did not stay awake."

"Debility, nothing but debility. We will soon set you right. A simple tonic—a glass of port wine every morning about eleven; a small basin of strong beef-tea, hot or cold as you like, before going to bed; light, nourishing diet—fish, game, underdone chop or steak, milk-pudding, not much vegetable, and *no* potatoes—you will observe, *no* potatoes."

"I am particularly fond of potatoes," urged Stasie.

"Renounce them for the present, my dear

young lady. I will send up the tonic directly. Follow my directions as to diet, and you will soon be out of my hands."

"Very well," replied Stasie good-humouredly. "You are going to lose one patient as soon as you gain another. Miss Mathews returns home, I am sorry to say, to-morrow."

The good old doctor, who was proud of his young patient's rapid improvement, which he considered due to his own skill more than to such accidents as change of air and congenial society, expressed proper regret, and hopes of seeing her again ere long, and was going to take leave when Miss Stretton exclaimed—"Before you go, doctor, I must really consult you about this mysterious pain in my left arm. It commences generally about the elbow, slowly ascends, increasing in torture every moment, passes through the shoulder, and culminates in my ear!"

"Very remarkable," said the doctor gravely.

"Perhaps you will just step into the dining-room and hear a more detailed account of the symptoms."

"Certainly, madam."



"I wonder auntie has not complained before," said Stasie to Janet, who had come in from the garden to say good-bye to the doctor. "She must have suffered a great deal from what she says."

"Oh, I heard her complain two or three times, but I did not mind much."

"She is rather funny about her complaints, yet I daresay she *does* suffer, poor soul. She has not had a very smooth life."

"Perhaps not ; it is pretty smooth now."

"I hope so."

Though Stasie said she felt quite herself, she was aware of a weary, depressed sensation, against which she struggled earnestly, telling herself it was but laziness and a tendency to self-indulgence.

She therefore busied herself in assisting Janet to pack up her belongings, adding some useful gifts to that young lady's possessions.

Late in the afternoon Brooke appeared with Mrs. Harding, and made very particular inquiries as to Stasie's condition. Her report seemed to satisfy him, and after a short visit he departed, leaving an impression on Stasie that he was unusually silent and preoccupied.

"Of course I shall find you here on my return from Scotland," he said, as he rose to take leave.

"Oh yes," replied Stasie. "I suppose we shall stay far into the winter, but not the whole of it. I want to go to town before Christmas ; it will be very dull when Mrs. Harding leaves."

"We shall not leave just yet," said that lady. "Mr. Harding seems disposed to stay till November."

"I hope to find you more blooming than ever on my return," said Brooke, holding out his hand to Stasie. "So *au revoir*—not good-bye."

"*Au revoir*," replied Stasie pleasantly.

"Will you walk with me to the station?" asked Brooke of his cousin.

"Part of the way, at any rate," she returned.

They went away together, and Stasie stood on the doorsteps, where she had accompanied her friend, looking after them somewhat wistfully. She was conscious of a certain degree of sadness, of a sense of being left alone. Why had not Mrs. Harding asked her *too* to walk to the station? When should she see Brooke again? He talked of returning, but that was a mere chance.

She started at the consciousness of her own

regret. This would not do. She ought to be ashamed of herself for thinking with regret about a man who, however nice and good, did not care one straw about her ; she must not be weak and sentimental ; she must impress him with the idea of her friendly indifference.

In this mood she gladly welcomed Mr. Robinson and Captain Pearson, both of whom called to inquire for her, and spent an hour playing croquet with Janet and herself.

It was sunset when they left, and Stasie, throwing a shawl round her, went out to meet Mrs. Harding, who was passing with the children, whom she had met at the station. "Are you quite well?" she asked, "you look white and tired."

"Yes, I am tired," she said hastily ; "but I must not stop, Stasie. Tell Janet to come up and say good-bye to morrow morning!" and she pressed on.

"May I never put my head in such a yoke!" thought Stasie, as she looked after her for a minute, and then turned to go in, when Bhoothoo came from behind some rose bushes where he had been weeding.

He made a low salaam, raising his right hand to his brow, with the dignified humility of an Eastern.

"The missee Sahib is well again?" he said in his soft broken English; "I so sorry, so frightened to hear she was sick."

"Thank you, Bhoo dhoo, I am quite right to-day. I suppose I was over-tired. It was a nice treat for the children, was it not? You were a great help, I am sure," she added kindly.

The man again salaamed and paused. "The missee Sahib is very good to Bhoo dhoo—too good! It was nice, very nice feast; pleasant to see little babas eat and run about. If Kharapet Sahib were there, he very much pleased—he very kind good gentleman."

"Yes, he is very good to you; and, Bhoo dhoo, you made me an excellent currie to-day. I like currie, though no one else does!"

"Yes, missee, I eat up what missee left; de cook and Mary say it is not good; foolish women."

"I will tell you what you shall do for us," said Stasie; "I will ask Mr. and Mrs. Harding, and you shall cook us an Eastern dinner."

The man's eyes sparkled. He was an artist in his way. "I sure to please the mem Sahib and Bhourra Sahib. I can make good dinner—very good—with English dishes too. If missee Sahib will listen to me she will make me cook ; woman cook no good ; she know nothing ; she use butter like that"—holding one hand about half a yard above the other, and "meat like that," putting them some two feet apart ; she is good herself, but she know no better ; let me be cook, and missee will see she can eat well and not use half as much."

"You must talk of all that to Miss Stretton," said Stasie, smiling ; "I do not interfere."

"Ah, but the missee Sahib will let me speak she not angry ?"

"Oh, no ; but how will Susan like to be superseded—to have her place taken?" she added, seeing that Bhoddhoo did not quite take in her meaning.

"She well pleased ; does not like standing by fire ; make her hot and red," said the man a little eagerly ; "and I do not mind working a little in garden for missee, but that is not my work in my own country ; another man make

garden, but I have crossed the black water, and can do many things."

"Very well, Bhoodhoo, speak to Miss Stretton if you like."

"Thank you, missee." The man stopped suddenly, as if keeping back some words, and Stasie left him still standing, as she walked into the house.

. . . . .

The next day was a sorry one to Janet, who had deeply enjoyed the many pleasures and, as it seemed to her, the luxuries of Sefton Park. Still, going back was not without its compensations. She was pleased to see "mother" again, and, if lessons had not loomed in the near horizon, would have been less depressed.

Miss Stretton bore the separation with much equanimity. She was given to a slightly unreasonable jealousy of "those Mathews" and their claims upon Stasie. Her consciousness of her niece's honest, faithful affection for her early friends forced her to be very prudent in her expressions respecting them, which did not diminish the mental *virus*.

Now that Janet's visit was fairly over, she

thought she would have Stasie all to herself, and see what could be done to further Kharapet's views. For her own part she would not have been sorry if Kharapet had betaken himself to his native land, and left her to enjoy the unexpected good fortune which had befallen her. But the Syrian gentleman had managed so to impress upon her an idea of his power, to serve or to injure her, that she never dreamed of disobeying him. Besides, he had managed to stir the last embers of expiring romance yet living in her somewhat starved imagination, and she really sympathised with what she considered his true and devoted attachment to Stasie. Miss Stretton was heartily on his side, and a little inclined to be peevish with her niece for not reciprocating his passion. Now that Janet was going away, she would have more opportunity of talking confidentially with, and influencing, Stasie. "Those Mathews" being somehow or other inimical in their effect, filling the dear child's head with silly notions of her own independence.

Miss Stretton was therefore most amiable and thoughtful in her provision for Janet's journey, and threw herself so heartily into the packing-up

f some dainties in the shape of game and preserves, etc., for Mrs. Mathews, that Stasie, who vibrated with unerring responsiveness to the slightest discordant or sympathetic touch, was quite drawn to her aunt.

Though scarcely a companion, yet Janet Mathews was a loss to Stasie.

She brought an atmosphere of youthful, healthy life into the quiet house. Stasie missed her noisy ascents and descents of the stairs, the necessity of calling out, "*Do shut the door, Janet,*" followed by a reckless slam; she also missed the demands on her time and patience — she now had nothing to do but to sit down and read or study music, or please herself in any way she liked. She was not discontented, nor was she content. But she did not sit down and indulge in morbid fancies, she went out and in, and tried to speak French with Mademoiselle, to help Mrs. Harding with her needlework (for Mr. Harding expected his children to be smart, at the smallest possible cost), to help Mr. Robinson with the poor, and make Aunt Clem consent to entertain him and Mr. and Mrs. Harding at dinner. This



was a tremendous exertion, but a great success; Boodhoo covered himself with honour, and fixed his position as a "cordonbleu."

Mr. Harding, who was in the highest good humour, as usual with him when eating and drinking at other people's expense, declared that Boodhoo must come and show his cook how to boil rice, for it was an extraordinary fact that no Englishwoman could accomplish that simple operation successfully.

Having found his way to Sefton Park, Mr. Pearson soon became familiar with the road, sometimes making a visit to Mrs. Harding, his ostensible motive, but often coming direct to Limeville with a book, or some original composition of the regimental bandmaster's for Miss Verner to try over, or, in short, some mature rendering of "An apple or a cherry, or a new invented game" of the old ballad.

"I declare, here is that Mr. Pearson again," cried Miss Stretton the day after their dinner party, "and I have not changed my dress—so early too! I suppose he expects luncheon! Stasie, dear, I must run away—you do not mind!"

"Not in the least! but, auntie, you need not run away. Your wrapper is very pretty; your work quite nice."

But Miss Stretton was gone! and enter Mr. Pearson, slight, graceful, in a dark admirably-fitting shooting-jacket, perfectly attired at all points, moustaches carefully trimmed, bright laughing eyes, mien of a conqueror, perfectly, yet pleasantly, pleased with himself.

"Hope you will forgive me for calling so early, Miss Verner?"

"I am glad to see you," said Stasie simply and truthfully.

"The fact is," resumed Mr. Pearson "I am on duty to-day and must return early. To-morrow I am going down to Southsea for a day or two, so you see I cannot come again till next week."

"Do not apologise," returned Stasie, laughing.

"You are very good, Miss Verner," settling himself comfortably into a deep armchair. "What have you been doing since I saw you? How is the parson? dangerous fellows these parsons!"

"Are they?" returned Stasie, opening her work-basket and taking out a little print frock

she was making for the child of a poor widow, her favourite *protégée*. "I don't know much about parsons, except Mr. Robinson, and I am very fond of *him*!"

"Poor Robinson! It is rather annihilating to a man when a young lady says openly, 'I am very fond of him!'"

"I do not think Mr. Robinson would mind. I flatter myself he is very fond of *me*."

"That is exceedingly probable," said the gallant lancer. "I dare say you find it is a general tendency among your friends."

"I am not sure."

"What are you making, Miss Verner? is it—is it—a chair-cover?"

"No, Mr. Pearson," said Stasie, laughing; "it is a little girl's frock."

"Ah! I see—a Dorcas concern. I had a sister who went in for that sort of thing—she was in love with a parson then; but I don't think she was a first hand. The mothers complained she didn't give the right cut; the frocks were not in the last fashion."

"My poor people know nothing of fashion; they are very thankful for anything they can get."

“ Well! my sister cut the whole concern— quarrelled with the parson, threw over the women and babies, and married a cavalry colonel old enough to be her father; he had been awfully fast, but they are as happy as a pair of doves, and she is never at home except when he receives.”

“ That was certainly a change.”

“ I am going to stay with her for a garden party and something else. I wish you were coming, Miss Verner.”

“ Thank you. So do I.”

“ If we had only thought of it—it might have been so easily managed. You must be awfully dull here!”

“ No; not so dull as you might think. But I do not intend to stay here always.”

“ I should think not! What do you say to a little riding? My second charger is uncommonly safe and steady, and I should be only too glad if you'd try him. Do, Miss Verner! My man could bring over the horses early of a morning, and let them rest, and I could come later, in time to give you a lesson (I think you said you have never ridden). We could manage it three

times a week. In a month I am certain you would be quite at home on horseback, *Do*, Miss Verner,"

"It would be perfectly delicious!" cried Stasie, laying down her work and gazing at him with sparkling eyes.

Mr. Pearson's said very plainly that he thought anything shared with her would be delicious, but his reply was cut short by the entrance of Miss Stretton, who reappeared in all the glories of her afternoon costume.

She was dignified, and not too gracious; but young Pearson was sweetly respectful. He rose with *empressement*; he drew forward a chair, he sought for a footstool, he inquired with every mark of interest after her health—and his reward was that Miss Stretton said somewhat icily: "As you are so early, Mr. Pearson, perhaps you will stay to lunch?"

"Oh yes, Aunt Clem!" cried Stasie, somewhat scandalised at this inhospitable invitation. "Of course Mr. Pearson will stay to lunch; do you know, he is so kind as to say he will lend me a horse and come and teach me how to ride."

"Rather you will have the kindness to accept my teaching."

“ Ahem ! very kind indeed,” said Miss Stretton, drily.

“ Do you think we could manage it, auntie. It would be so delightful, and do me so much good, for really I have never felt quite—quite myself since that day I fainted ; I get so dizzy, and my heart beats sometimes as if it would burst—only, you know, for a moment or two.”

“ Certain horse exercise would set you up !” exclaimed the lancer.

“ My dear Stasie,” with a slightly shocked air, “ an instant’s reflection will show you the impossibility of such a scheme, unconnected as you are by any relationship with Mr. Pearson ; you could not ride about without a chaperon. If Mrs. Harding could accompany you, or Mr. Kharapet——”

“ Kharapet !” repeated Mr. Pearson. “ By Jove ! fancy him on horseback ! He would want an armchair and a pair of slipper-stirrups.”

Miss Stretton grew red with vexation ; Stasie laughed good-humouredly. “ I rather think Mr. Kharapet must know how to ride ; how else could he get about in his country ?”

“ Well, he does not look like it. But, I am

sure, I have no objection if he will get a mount and come with us. Why won't *you* come yourself, Miss Stretton? I am sure you would look stunning on horseback."

Miss Stretton drew herself up; she fancied the gay lancer was amusing himself at her expense. Stasie gave him a private warning look, to his great delight, as it seemed to establish an understanding between them.

"I wonder if Mr. Kharapet and Mr. Harding would let me have a horse of my own? I am sure they *might*," to Pearson.

"I should think so."

"My dear Stasie, a horse for you would involve a second for a groom, and an infinitude of trouble," cried Miss Stretton.

"Yes, yes; you had much better use mine, Miss Verner; and you must be awfully bored in this hole——"

"I do not think that is very polite, Mr. Pearson," said Miss Stretton, bridling.

"Isn't it? I am sure I am very sorry," began Mr. Pearson, when the sound of a bell announced luncheon.

. . . . .

Miss Stretton was sorely disturbed by this visit and daring proposition. She was afraid to speak to Stasie, who was tolerably persevering in her fancies ; and when she had mentioned the matter to Mrs. Harding that lady had not seemed at all surprised, simply remarking it would be a great treat for Stasie.

“But, my dear Mrs. Harding ! if we allow this young man to come here constantly, the next thing will be a proposal for my dearest niece.”

“Well, Miss Stretton, young Mr. Pearson is quite unobjectionable ; and it is well that Stasie should see other men than Mr. Kharapet and Dr. Brooke, though I do not fancy she intends to commit matrimony for some time. She wisely wishes to see something, and enjoy something of life before she plunges into its cares. Let us leave her to herself, poor child !”

“Yet—alone as she is in the world, dear Mrs. Harding—would it not be well if she were settled safely with a kind protector, a good husband, like that kind and excellent Mr. Kharapet ?”

“Who ?” said Mrs. Harding sharply. Then, returning to her usual tone, she continued with



an air of indifference, "Provided the husband *was* a protector, not a robber,—yes."

No more was then said, but Miss Stretton mused over Mrs. Harding's words till she worked herself into a virtuous rage. "She wants the dear sweet girl for that cousin of hers," thought Aunt Clem, "when she knows he is attached to herself! It is too infamous! She would just dictate everything in their house and out of it! I shall never forget the tone of *his* voice the day I overheard them talking. I don't suppose it is anything more than one of your sentimental friendships, that is half a love affair, still it is *very* reprehensible; and I daresay, if we knew but all, we would find poor Mr. Harding has enough to put up with! I am sure *I* always find him frank and friendly."

The worst suspicions gathered darkly and unresisted before the spinster's sharpened vision, giving her ample food for reflection, which was not without a degree of pleasurable excitement.

Some days passed, however, and the obnoxious lancer did not make his appearance. Miss Stretton's uneasiness became therefore less keen; but her anxiety for Mr. Kharapet's return increased;

it was tiresome of him to stay away so long, and foolish too. Certainly Stasie was more settled and stay-at-home the last few days, not always flying after Mrs. Harding. It was as well she should learn to do without her!

These reflections had been mingling with and somewhat marring Miss Stretton's efforts to make up the week's accounts, always a severe trial to her temper; for Aunt Clem was an indifferent financier, and found it extremely difficult to keep within any given sum, while she firmly believed that she owed it to herself to make some private savings from the house allowance. At present, however, things went better, and Bhoothoo's administration was decidedly economical.

At length she put away her books and went into the drawing-room, where the lamp was lit and the night shut out, for the evening meal was over.

She found Stasie lying on the sofa, a light shawl round her shoulders, and a big book in her hand.

"My dear, it is something wonderful to see *you* lying down! Don't you feel well?"

"Not exactly. I felt very weary and dizzy

all yesterday and to-day. I suppose it is the autumn. They say that spring and autumn are trying. This evening I am chill and tired, so I lay down."

"My darling Stasie, I feel quite uneasy. You must see Dr. Hunter to-morrow."

"Nonsense, auntie! I am not bad enough for that. I shall be all right to-morrow. I hate taking medicine, and those bottles of his have not done one bit of good."

"Still, my dear, if you are not better to-morrow, I must call in Dr. Hunter."

"Very well, Aunt Clem; I shall be much better to-morrow."

"I trust you will, my love," said Aunt Clem, roaming rather aimlessly about the room. I wonder where Mary can have put my work? I know I laid it on that little table by the window before tea, and I had just two or three sprigs to finish of the pattern."

"Perhaps she put it in your basket," suggested Stasie.

"Not she! it never would occur to her to put it in the right place. But perhaps it would be better not to work by lamp-light; my eyes

are far from strong. I will just finish the paper."

Miss Stretton drew up the easiest of the easy-chairs close to the table, and settled herself for an exhaustive examination of the morning paper. So Stasie was left awhile uninterrupted to her studies. But this could not last long. Aunt Clem generally found the presence of a companion an irresistible temptation to speech.

"What are you reading, Stasie?"

"The history of civilisation."

"Isn't it rather dry for you, my love? Perhaps trying to understand it may have helped to make you dizzy?"

"No, I do not think so. There are bits I am too ignorant to take in quite, but on the whole it is immensely interesting. It seems to open my eyes. How miserably ill-educated I am!"

"I do not agree with you, Stasie. You certainly have not had first-rate masters, but you know quite as much as most young ladies, and you are coming on nicely with your music.

Stasie made no reply, and silence reigned till it grew oppressive—to Miss Stretton at least. She looked at the volume in her niece's hand for

a few moments, seeking in her memory to clear some dim association from the mists which wrapped it. At last she caught the idea :

“Stasie, dear ! is that the book Mr. Robinson said was decidedly atheistic in its tendency ?”

“It is, Aunt Clem.”

“Then why will you persist in reading it against the advice of your spiritual director ? Depend upon it, this kind of literature is most pernicious. You really ought to give it up.”

“I do not think it does me any harm,” said Stasie wearily ; “and Mr. Robinson only said it was written by a sceptic ; he did not advise me against it. I should not have minded if he had.”

“My dear child, I fear you have rather a rebellious spirit ! At your age you need guidance.”

“Yes, I daresay I do. If Mr. Robinson said the book was bad, or coarse, or anything like that, I would never have looked at it, but——” She stopped, and began to read again.

“Well, at your age Stasie, I would have trembled at the thought of an irreligious book ! I composed some prayers myself at the age of twelve, and always taught in a Sunday school, of course the style of thing that was then the

fashion. I mean," correcting herself rapidly, "The present refined and elevated tone of religious conviction had not developed, and the individual was left more to her own resources—to wander, perhaps! We had less of the spiritual guidance, the personal care which is so soothing and improving under the High Church system."

Finding that Stasie neither listened nor replied, Miss Stretton ceased, and dipped into the evidence in an interesting case of robbery and murder; but, after a while, Stasie, in her turn, interrupted her aunt by speaking suddenly:

"Will you give me the card that is lying on the table near you, auntie, please; I want to mark the place; I am sure Dr. Brooke will explain this to me when he comes back."

"Why not apply to your natural guide, Mr. Robinson, or that really good and learned man, Mr. Kharapet?"

"Neither of them know half as much as Dr. Brooke, and he is very good too."

"Ahem! we really know very little of Dr. Brooke," said Miss Stretton stiffly.

Stasie did not heed. She read on, but presently put down her book and closed her eyes.

Aunt Clem, observing this, softly laid down her paper, to avoid the noise of its rustling. She sat awhile in thought, and then, with a glance at the sleeper, drew a pack of cards from her pocket and began to shuffle them for some moments with an earnest fixed look in her eyes; she then cut them several times, and proceeded to spread them out in rows. She was so absorbed in this occupation she did not notice that Stasie had moved restlessly and opened her eyes. She was therefore considerably startled when her niece exclaimed, "What are you doing, auntie? playing patience? Why don't you take up the cards?"

"Well, it is not exactly patience," returned Miss Stretton with slight embarrassment; "it is a different sort of game—in short, I learned it from a dear old French lady who was staying in the same pension with us in Paris—oh, a long time ago; she had been taught by the celebrated Mademoiselle Le Norman. I suppose you know who she was?"

"The fortune-teller they say Napoleon—the first Napoleon—used to consult."

"Exactly."

"Then are you telling your own fortune, auntie?"

"No—that is, there isn't much to foresee about myself. Thanks to you, dear child, I hope I have seen the last of my troubles; but I was just trying to get an idea of when Mr. Kharapet would come back."

"But you don't believe in this fortune-telling," cried Stasie, getting off her sofa and coming over to the table.

"Oh no," said Miss Stretton, "of course not, no one does, you know; but it is amusing, and it is really curious how things turn out sometimes."

"If I were to be superstitious," said Stasie, kneeling down on a large footstool and resting her elbows on the table, "I should prefer astrology to cards—there is something grand and fanciful in having a star presiding over one's fortunes—but these bits of pasteboard——"

"Yet people—men of commanding intellect—have deigned to consult them," put in Miss Stretton gravely, as her niece paused; "and I have myself seen wonderfully clear at times. Of course it is all nonsense," she went on quickly, seeing a sparkle of fun in Stasie's eyes, "and (gathering



up the cards) they shall not offend your superior sense; let us put them away."

"No no, auntie dear," cried Stasie, catching her hand. "Was I rude? Forgive me. I should like to see how you do it. Won't you tell my fortune, auntie?"

"I think, my love, you are a very persuasive child; but if you have a fault, dear, it is preferring your own youthful judgment to the experience—the maturer opinions of your elders."

"I am afraid I do think too much of myself," said Stasie reflectively. "Come now, Aunt Clem, do tell me my fortune?"

"If I do, you must never say one word to Mrs. Harding: she is one of your cold intellectual women, who despise such little pastimes, for I need not tell you that it is a mere amusement."

"Oh yes; nothing more of course," returned Stasie, struggling to keep the corners of her mouth in order, for she perceived that it was in reality anything but play to her aunt. "And, trust me, I shall never say one word to any one."

"Very well; now take the cards and shuffle them; now cut nine times. No, leave them there; I will take them up."

Having done so, Miss Stretton cut them once more, glanced rapidly at the card turned up, and replaced them. Then she proceeded to lay them out in rows of nine, till the pack (from which he had extracted the smaller cards) was exhausted. Stasie watched with amused curiosity, while Miss Stretton, gazing intently on the cards, her lips moving as though repeating something to herself, kept silence for a minute or two, and then exclaimed impressively: "It is really quite remarkable, and as plain—as plain as I see you, Stasie!"

"What is plain, Aunt Clem?"

"There is a dark man—a very dark man—at a distance, whose thoughts are all about you, making arrangements at this moment to come back to you."

"Can you see all that?" cried Stasie, smiling. "Has he a portmanteau, or only a travelling bag?"

"Ah! you may laugh, but I see it quite clear. He is a long way off, but *not* across water."

"Can you not see the name of the place?" asked Stasie, whose pale cheek began to show a little warmth, and her eyes lit up.

"No, no ; that is expecting too much," and, silyly, "if the cards speak truth, you too are thinking of his return."

"Then it is Mr. Pearson," said Stasie. "I shall be very pleased indeed to see him back."

Miss Stretton shook her head. "He is clubs," said she sagely. "The man who is thinking of you is spades ;" she paused. "I cannot make it out. There is some danger threatening you from a dark man and a woman, some one very much interested in you, it cannot be me ; let me see." She touched one or two cards, murmuring something. "Yes," she resumed, "a club woman."

"Can you see when we are to start on our travels, aunt ?"

"No ; but I think you will go far away. Stop, Stasie, I want to try this again. That other dark man and the club lady are very much mixed up together, and fond of one another. Could it be Dr. Brooke and Mrs. Harding ?"

"I daresay ; they are very fond of each other."

"Why, have *you* observed that ?" exclaimed Miss Stretton with emphasis.

"Of course, I know they were dear friends in their early days and relations."

"That may be, still it is not right, and must be rather trying to poor Mr. Harding."

"What *are* you talking about, Aunt Clem?" cried Stasie flushing crimson. "What in the world is there 'trying' to Mr. Harding in Dr. Brooke's friendship with his wife? What possible harm can there be? what offence in such friendship?"

"Ah! my dear child, don't fly into a rage. You have not seen as much of the world as I have; and," shaking her head, "though I don't suppose Mrs. Harding thinks much about it, at least I should hope not, I know *he* is very much attached to her, and that sort of thing is imprudent and really immoral."

"How do you know he is so much attached to her?" asked Stasie, struck by her aunt's certainty.

"Oh! I can see it quite well. And men of Dr. Brooke's stamp, wanderers, men used to camps and the wild ways of military companions, they have really *no* principle worth mentioning; and if Mrs. Harding interests him, and *I know* she does, why——"

"Aunt Clem, I am certain you wrong Dr. Brooke. He gives *me* the idea of an upright honourable man. How is it that you are so convinced?"

"Well, dear, I heard something by the merest accident. I would never breathe it to a soul but yourself, for indeed I am truly interested in that dear little Mrs. Harding," began Miss Stretton suddenly, imagining that she had hit on the best possible means of lowering or altering Stasie's esteem for Brooke, who was by no means a favourite with the gentle spinster.

"What did you hear?" cried Stasie, almost quivering with indignant eagerness, as Miss Stretton paused.

"You remember that Sunday, the day they found out that you had given away your jewels?" Stasie nodded. "Well, you remember you asked me to go down and see if they were all gone, the gentlemen I mean. When I went in they, Mrs. Harding and Dr. Brooke, were talking so earnestly they never heard me, and before I could say a word or make a noise in any way I heard Dr. Brooke say, 'You know there is nothing I would not do for you. I would lay down my

life for you,' and with that he kissed her hand *several* times. It was not the words only, Stasie, but the voice; I could not describe it. I would not believe that cold, stiff man could have spoken so tenderly, so softly, had I not heard him."

Stasie again flushed, but her colour died quickly away. "And what did they say when they saw you?" she asked.

"They did *not* see me, dear; it would have been too awkward. I just slipped out of the room, made a noise with the door-handle, and came back again."

"You should have stayed," said Stasie gravely, "and they would have explained it. I cannot believe that either feel anything but sincere regard and friendship for each other. I am sure I wish poor dear Mrs. Harding *had* married Dr. Brooke; she would have been ever so much happier. There, don't let us talk any more about it, and do put such suspicions out of your mind; they are base, unjust, unworthy. There, go on with my fortune, do, auntie."

"I must say, Stasie, you allow yourself to speak most unguardedly, with a degree of heat

which is neither ladylike nor respectful. Were I wealthy and independent you would not address me in such a tone." Miss Stretton pressed her handkerchief to her eyes; this was an unailing device.

"You know you are quite wrong," cried Stasie, jumping up and turning her aunt's face forcibly to her. "I'd say twice as much if you were, I wish you had ten thousand a year, that I might abuse you heartily, for I am very, *very* angry. Mind, I don't believe you are right, not a bit; and yet you have made me uncomfortable."

"Well, my dear, time will show; I shall be very glad to know I am wrong. As to the cards, I see there is one man, a *very* dark man, truly and devotedly attached to you, and he will soon be here. I am sorry to say I also see a great deal of trouble and worry and confusion, from which a faithful female friend will help to save you, and then there is nothing clear except the devotion of this king of spades, whose thoughts follow you everywhere."

"And is this muddle all you can make out, auntie?" said Stasie, rising from her footstool to which she had returned. "I suppose the

sted friend is yourself, and I see quite well  
ugly king of spades you intend to represent  
muz Kharapet. If so, I shall tell you the  
of the fortune myself. My trouble will be  
ake you well and strong and able to travel,  
hich you will help. As to Hormuz, he may  
k what he likes, but beyond the power law  
s him to dole out my money by dribblets, he  
l never have anything to do with me or my  
rs once I get them into my own hands. So  
l-night, Aunt Clem."







## CHAPTER XI.

NEARLY three weeks had elapsed since Dr. Brooke had appeared at Sefton Park. During this time life flowed as usual, smooth and unruffled, in that modern Arcadia, yet Mrs. Harding was aware of a distinct change in her husband from the comparatively sunny mood which had rendered the first months in their summer quarters unusually easy and even cheerful to her.

He suddenly ceased to take any interest in the garden, in the pigs, in the poultry, or even the completion of the fowl-house—that *chef d'œuvre* which had emanated from his own brain. He no longer returned early from town to harass the gardener, to worry the nondescript caretaker of the ponies and horse, who was a mixture of groom and odd man, to tramp about the fields devising how “rights of way” might be stopped, and the hedge-rows converted into gold yielding

sites for villas. He no longer came in healthily fatigued at night to amuse himself by elaborate calculations of how much the pigs—principally fed by refuse from the house—would stand him per pound when killed, cured, and ready for the table, or the value of the eggs produced under the same conditions.

He now returned by the last train, and sometimes missed that, leaving Mrs. Harding to form what conjectures she liked rather than incur the cost of a telegram. And when he did return, he growled less about his food, and was less keen in noticing specks on the plate. Occasionally he was furiously impatient, but on the whole less oppressively exacting than usual; besides this he ate less, and did not seem to care what he ate, a sign of disturbance more serious than anything his wife had ever before observed.

She felt sure that something serious had affected him, yet she did not like to ask what. There was no attempt at confidence between them. He was a harsh, over-bearing taskmaster, and she a silent, submissive, but deeply resentful slave.

Even when a kindly feeling exists between

husband and wife, a thoughtful woman will hesitate to put questions which may only trouble a husband already wearied with care, the answers to which she perhaps could not understand, and the difficulties which they reveal she cannot help to disentangle. Often a truly sympathetic wife wisely waits for a confidence to be given, which it would be useless to force.

Still Mrs. Harding's was not a nature that could look with indifference on signs of suffering even in one who had inflicted so much on herself. When not stirred into active but impotent anger, her mental attitude towards her husband was that of indifference, tinged with contempt. She had long striven to win him; it was long before she could believe that all the delicate nostrums she had heard and read of for the cure of brutal, selfish, tyrannical husbands—affection, forbearance, submission, patience and the like, were fruitless, unavailing—before she learned the bitter lesson that there are men with whom stinging self-assertion and unhesitating displays of coarse ill-temper do more than all the refined self-control of the most gracious gentlewoman. But these were weapons unfitted to her hand, while the

means supposed to be infallible only served to put her under the feet of her savage lord. Now her sole hope was to keep a certain exterior decency in their home. The thought of quitting it, of freeing herself from the almost intolerable degradation of her life, never crossed her brain. She lived for her children; she knew the cruel penalties that awaited a separated wife, and the family thus sundered; nor had she the legal right to complain. No, endurance only was all left to her, and she resolved to endure.

But at present she felt anxious about Mr. Harding; nothing save money troubles could affect him, she felt sure, and these would touch her little ones. She felt even disposed to question her husband, but that the dread of a rude rejoinder kept her silent. At length, one evening, Mr. Harding having sent away his dinner nearly untouched, and asked his wife to mix him a third tumbler of brandy and water, she ventured to speak. "You do not seem well—you have scarcely eaten, and I do not think it can be good for you to take such an unusual amount of spirits."

"Don't bother about that! I feel to want

it. No, I am not quite the thing, and I have had a thundering big bill for those new curtains we got for York Gate house last spring. It's infamous! Just look here," drawing a long envelope out of his breast-pocket, "sixty pounds, by George! There must be some infamous imposition somewhere!"

Mrs. Harding took the account and looked over it. "I do not think we can object to any of the items," she said. "I remember we agreed to almost all this when we ordered the curtains."

"Ay, just so! that's right. Always stand up for everything that can drag money out of your husband's pocket!"

This was a style of answer to which Mrs. Harding was well accustomed, but the tone was unusual,—not angry and contemptuous,—rather dejected and querulous, as if he were the victim of a virago. She could not help smiling.

"I am sorry you have such a large sum to pay, but I fear it will be useless to dispute anything. However, I have no doubt these people will wait till it is convenient to you——"

"Ay, but when will it be convenient? Don't

suppose I am going to get richer, nothing of the kind! Give me my cigar-case, will you."

A silence ensued, while Mr. Harding cut off the end of his cigar, lit it, and took a few preliminary puffs.

Then in the same subdued manner he said reflectively, "I wish you had had some money, my dear." Mrs. Harding was more than astonished at this different setting of an old tune. He must have some great trouble on his mind, she thought, and answered gently—

"I wish I had, John, if it could be of any use to you."

"Money is always of use," he returned with a heavy sigh. "You ain't a bad creature, Livy—I always said so—but too careless, too regardless of my interests—I who have done everything for you, and made you what you are!"

Mrs. Harding looked up from her work and made no reply beyond a smile. Her husband having puffed in silence for a minute, she said: "Have you had any loss? I do not wish to worry you for details, but if you want to reduce our outlay, say so, and I will do my best."

Mr. Harding groaned. "That's the mischief

of it. Don't you think you could do on fifteen pounds a month less and not make any material difference ? ”

“ That is quite out of the question, but we might live very comfortably on much less than we do by attempting less.”

“ Ay, that's just like you. You have no regard for appearances. How would it do to stay on here till after Christmas ? ”

“ I should have no objection, and it would certainly be an economy ; only I fear the old house would be neither warm nor dry.”

“ I will see about it. The fact is, I have been shamefully plundered—shamefully, by a dashed infernal fellow who pretended to be my friend.”

“ Indeed ! ” exclaimed Mrs. Harding infinitely surprised. To err by overtrust in another was not one of her husband's usual characteristics.

“ I hope to make up for it in time, but at present I would be glad if you would take the trouble to be very, *very* careful, Livy, as careful as you can be without making any visible change. ‘ Drawing in ’ damages a man's credit.”

“ I will do my best,” returned Mrs. Harding, struck by his unusual amiability and the fact

that he called her "Livy," for he rarely gave her any name. She thought she would make an attempt to establish a better tone between them. "In any case I will do my best," she resumed after an instant's pause ; "and as we are talking confidentially, don't you think you could manage to forgive me my want of fortune ? It would be much better for us all. You yourself would be more comfortable if you were not constantly in a state of resentful irritation against me. Of course my want of fortune is exceedingly provoking, but you see the law does not allow you to repudiate me on that account. If it did, I should not, of course, have a word to say ; as it is, suppose we make the best of each other for the children's sake. Suppose you take the trouble to speak as politely to *me* as you do to—Jane, for instance, I think you would find matters go smoother."

Harding listened with a good deal of surprise, not so much at the words as at the quiet, resolute accent with which they were spoken. He was too coarse, too morally blind, to perceive the depth of indifference, the absence of all regard which enabled his wife to speak as she did.



"I don't think I ever heard you talk so sensibly before," he said. "I am sure I always try to be a good husband, and you want for nothing. But you must see it is hard on a man when all the expenses come out of one purse, and I must say you do not show that keen regard for my interest I have a right to expect. You are a curious creature, Livy. You don't care for appearances, and yet you do not care to hold money."

"I wish you could see that there is no real gain in trying to beat down prices below the market value, nor in underpaying the services of those you employ. Nevertheless, I will do my very best as I said, only never expect me to get thirty shillings' worth out of a sovereign."

"You know that's —— nonsense," interjected her husband.

"One word more, John," continued Mrs. Harding, her courage growing as she spoke. "Put a little restraint on your own impulses, your habit of crushing me with outbursts of contemptuous anger. I have grown used to them, and think I have tried silence long enough. The next time you speak in this objectionable way, why—I shall answer."

Mr. Harding stared at his wife, and she met his eye steadily, gravely, without the least anger or defiance.

“I’m sure I don’t know what you are talking about,” he said peevishly. “I only want to do the best I can for us all. I wish you didn’t take these crotchets into your head. When a man has been working his heart out for his wife and family, he can’t always be expected to be as smooth as silk.”

“Perhaps not,” returned Mrs. Harding calmly; “but try and distribute your ruggedness impartially.”

He did not reply, and silence fell upon them both. Mrs. Harding’s heart beat fast. Had she indeed won the key of the position. It was a great point to have been able without noise to show her husband something of what she felt, and now she must nail her colours to the mast!

After draining his tumbler, Mr. Harding, speaking as if out of his thoughts, exclaimed—

“Kharapet is back again. He was at the office to-day.”

“I suppose we shall see him here to-morrow then?”

"Yes, he said he would come down, and I asked him to dinner, the——sneak."

"I thought you were on very good terms," said Mrs. Harding with surprise, "but I confess I never liked him."

"Yes, I know that, and *he* knows it, and I beg you will not show it so plainly. It does not suit me to be on bad terms with the fellow. Moreover it would be a bad business for Stasie Verner if the two executors could not act together! In short, Livy, you must not give Kharapet the cold shoulder—not at present, at least; he is a queer customer."

"I shall never be rude to him, but I cannot be cordial."

"Well, well, don't look at him as if he were dirt."

Mrs. Harding laughed, and soon after her husband declared himself too dead beat to keep out of bed any longer.

Brooke was half surprised and half amused at the impatience with which he looked forward to the end of his visit in the Highlands. His hosts were kind and cordial, he had a fair amount of

sport, and occasionally met very pleasant people. Amongst them pretty lively *mondé* girls, to whom he made himself agreeable ; so agreeable, indeed, that he was pressed to visit more than one house. Business of importance, however, obliged him to return to London, he said, and there he duly arrived little more than a fortnight after he had left it. He resisted the temptation to run down to Sefton Park the very next day, and busied himself about some commissions for his brother and the friends he had just left. But he was none the less haunted by the vivid memory of Stasie Verner who, from the first, had made a deeper impression on his senses than he was aware. He had but to close his eyes and she was before them ; the round, rich, graceful figure, the large earnest eyes, so variable in expression, and the mouth so sweet, so proud, so scornful, as the passing temper of the moment moved her ; above all, the subtile fascination of believing there was a secret sympathy between them threw its glamour over him.

And he had misjudged her ! He had been so dull, so low in mind, as to suppose that a creature frank and noble, a woman capable of

forming a high ideal, would have stooped to a miserable flirtation with a creature like Bob Mathews! and have had the effrontery to write to himself, a stranger, to shield her clandestine amour! How gallantly, too, she stood to her guns, when the moment of discovery came! A girl of such calibre could love, ay, well! truly passionately! Why should he not try to win that love! But he was so much older than this bright young creature, who was full to the lips with life! a grave sombre fellow too! who had none of the gallant graces that charm women, only an earnest heart, that could be kind and true, and, he began to suspect, passionately loving!

Of course Dr. Brooke did not sit down and dream like a sentimental girl. But such thoughts flashed through his mind at the most unlikely times, always more or less vivid and enticing.

Still he was no foolish boy to let go the reins of his self-control or show his hand too soon, and it was not till the fourth day after his return from Scotland that he permitted himself to take the train for Sefton Park, and present himself to his cousin.

She received him with all the more cordiality as she expected to see Kharapet, when the door opened to admit him.

"I did not think you would come back so soon," she said, after they had exchanged greetings. "I thought Scotland and the moors would have too much attraction to be left."

"They are pleasant, but I wanted to be in London for a while; it has all the interest of a possible future abode to me. And how has everything been going on since I went away?"

"Just as usual, for myself better than usual. I am trying to follow your good advice. Oh! what an idiot I have been!"

"I am afraid you have," said Brooke, laughing. "And how is your friend Miss Verner?"

"Very well—that is, not quite well. I do not think she has been so well since the day of the school treat, though she does not admit it. I imagine she is not quite so bright, so energetic. You must notice her and tell me what you think. She is looking well enough."

"Then we will hope she is well!" After some talk about the children, a topic on which, though not diffuse, Mrs. Harding always had

something to say, Brooke asked, "And what news of the gentle Kharapet?"

Mrs. Harding laughed. "He is to dine here to-day. I am amused that both of you should make your appearance simultaneously! like the good and evil heroes of a drama, ready to counteract each other! Mr. Kharapet has been away at Lord Saintsbury's and elsewhere ever since you were here."

"I presume, as he comes from such saintly quarters, Kharapet is the good hero, and I am the impersonation of worldliness and wrong."

"Ah, Jim, if I can only gather strength to follow your counsels, I shall consider you *my* good genius."

"Have you been bullying Harding?"

"No, not exactly," smiling, "but finding him in a melting mood (I am afraid he has met with losses), I ventured to speak out with some effect. He listened, and only gently reproached me with my want of fortune and general incompetence, so I warned him that in future if he did not refrain from bursts of savage anger against me, before the children and the general public, I would answer accordingly. I think I could, if I once

nerved myself to the effort. I daresay he will forget what I said, but I will, if I can be true to myself, recall it to his memory on the first occasion."

"Stick to that, Livy," exclaimed Brooke earnestly, "and it will be better for you both. Men respect strength in women; it produces an immense effect on our, say, lower nature. It is a virtue you should assume even if you have it not."

"Il ne faut jamais faire agir un homme dans un sens différent de son caractère," quoted Mrs. Harding. "How is weakness to assume strength?"

"I suspect there is more strength in you than you are aware of; be brave, courage comes with exercise."

After a little more talk, and an interview with Ethel and Willie, who were going out to walk, Mrs. Harding proposed paying Stasie and Miss Stretton a visit. "I will leave with you," she continued, "then you can tell me what you think, for very probably I am all wrong in my ideas."

"Is Robinson at home?" asked Brooke.

"Yes, he is always at his post, as busy and energetic as ever. What a good, earnest little man he is! He would be ever so much happier



in some miserable crowded East End parish. He frets at being in what he considers the lap of luxury here."

"I must say it is rather a waste to expend one's energies preaching to a congregation of respectable old women of both sexes, who have never done anything amiss in all their well-regulated lives—one would prefer a hand-to-hand fight with the devil on his own ground."

Mrs. Harding walked on for a few moments in silence, then she explained: "I am very glad Mr. Harding thinks of staying here till near Christmas; I should be sorry to leave Stasie, she has quite grown like a sister to me."

"It will be dull here for you both."

"For me—no; less dull than London! For Stasie——" She stopped, for they were at the gate.

When the neat parlour-maid threw open the door of the drawing-room, it seemed to Brooke that he was being ushered into a large company.

The day was warm, and the open window showed the pretty garden and rich autumnal tints of the trees beyond. Miss Stretton was sitting at a well-furnished tea-table, flanked by Mr.

Robinson, who was evidently settled down to enjoy a refreshing cup in comfort.

In the recess of the window stood Kharapet. He had taken a glass of water from Bhoodhoo, who, in his best clothes, stood deferentially before him. Stasie was sitting on a sofa near the window, in a well-fitting black dress, with lace collar and cuffs, her hands were clasped, resting on her knee, and her attitude graceful but pensive; a slight smile parted her lips as she listened to Mr. Pearson, who was lounging easily on the sofa beside her, and playing with a large paper fan.

When Mrs. Harding and her cavalier entered, every one rose with *empressement*, Stasie occupying herself with Mrs. Harding until Brooke had spoken to the rest. When at last he made his bow to her, she held out her hand with a soft kindly smile.

"You have come back sooner than you expected," she said.

"I begin to think no one expected me to return," said Brooke, laughing; "Mrs. Harding received me almost with the same words: I had better go away again!"

"Why? you don't suppose we are not glad to

see you?" asked Stasie, returning to her sofa, while Brooke coolly took Mr. Pearson's place.

"I hope so," he said, "for my first visit has been to inquire for you. Have you quite recovered your indisposition? are you your own bright self again?" looking at her earnestly as he spoke.

"Oh, quite—quite; do not talk of it any more," a little impatiently; "Bhoodhoo, get Dr. Brooke a cup of tea."

"Thank you; I do not take any."

"You have been in Scotland?" said Mr. Pearson, drawing up a chair, and determined not to be distanced; "had you pretty good sport?"

"Very fair; the birds were rather wild, but I do not mind that—half the charm of a chase is its difficulty."

"I suppose, after the big game you have been accustomed to in India, our sport is rather slow?"

"Yes, a little tame."

"I think I should like to have a shot at a tiger, if the regiment goes to India."

"Is it going to India?" asked Stasie carelessly.

"I am not sure—I *used* to hope so," with expressive emphasis.

"Were I a man I should like to go to India," she replied.

"India is a delightful place for ladies, I assure you," said Brooke, and continued to talk about tiger-shooting and boar-hunting for a few minutes; while Kharapet, who had been speaking to Mrs. Harding and Miss Stretton, left off to observe the *rio*. Suddenly Stasie exclaimed—

"But where is Pearl?"

Every one stopped and looked round; and Mr. Pearson, kneeling down, drew something out from under the sofa.

"The little beggar is hiding, Miss Verner," he said.

The something, was a tiny pearl-gray Yorkshire terrier, with long fine hair, pathetic eyes, and a black nose. Mr. Pearson placed the little creature on Stasie's lap.

"This is a new acquisition since you were here, Dr. Brooke. Is it not a beauty? Mr. Pearson was so kind as to give it to me; and it is such a dear little intelligent creature! He begins to know me quite well, Mr. Pearson," in confirmation of which Pearl made a nearly successful attempt to lick his mistress's nose.

“Lucky little brute!” ejaculated the young lancer, with an admiring glance. “He *is* wonderfully intelligent, and very good-tempered; he never bites—at least scarcely ever. There was a groom of mine he never could stand; he bit *him* once or twice, and, do you know, he turned out such a dishonest blackguard I was obliged to get rid of him. We always thought he tried to poison Pearl. Just before the fellow left he was very ill, the Vet. could hardly save him. He thought the dog had been dosed.”

“He is a beauty, worthy of admittance to ‘my lady’s chamber,’” said Dr. Brooke, stroking the little creature, who sniffed at him in a friendly manner.

“Willie is quite fond of Pearl,” said Stasie to Mrs. Harding. “But Ethel is still half afraid of him—more than she is of Tilt, the big collie.”

“She is a terrible little coward. I do not understand it, for she has excellent health,” returned Mrs. Harding.

“She is a dear angel!” said Kharapet in his softest tone, as he drew a chair beside Miss Stretton. “I often spoke of your fair children to my Lord Saintsbury’s daughters, who were always

interested, especially Lady Emily Lumley, who is a most charming young lady."

"Ah! Mr. Kharapet," exclaimed Miss Stretton with a playful, juvenile air. "We do not want you to find charming people anywhere but at Sefton Park, humble though it be!" At which sensible speech Mr. Pearson elevated his eyebrows in a questioning, contemptuous way, and looked meaningly at Stasie. She returned his glance with an unmistakable air of mutual understanding that struck and startled Brooke, but not so much as did a glance from Kharapet, which he caught, and which showed that the Syrian perceived or imagined he was mocked. Quick as a flash of lightning an expression of deadly hatred, of fierce anger, gleamed in Kharapet's deep eyes, so baleful, so menacing, that Brooke felt he had been given a sudden revelation of the hell-fire burning below his fair soft seeming; but almost before the notion formed itself in his brain Kharapet was smooth and composed as ever.

"You are too good, too partial, dear lady," he said gently. "You move the mirth of my dear niece and her friend!" and he smiled benignly on them. Brooke was deeply impressed by this

sudden powerful exertion of self-control. A distinct sense that Stasie was not safe sprang up within him, never to be quite obliterated. Stasie was equally struck by Kharapet's applying the term "my niece" to her. He had not used it since he began to show her the attentions of an admirer. To her, his words were infinitely welcome. She took them as an assurance that he renounced all pretensions to be her lover; that he would return to the position in which he was most acceptable to her; and her heart leaped at the prospect of freedom from his persecution.

Mr. Pearson, who had quickly seen that Kharapet meant if possible to appropriate Stasie, heard this speech with no small surprise. "Is Mr. Kharapet your uncle?" he said in a loud astonished aside to Stasie.

"Not really." He is my dear stepfather's brother, and," with a nod to Kharapet, "I am quite willing to consider him a real uncle."

The Syrian bowed with a melancholy and subdued air.

Stasie's eyes sparkled at the happy chance thus afforded of showing her avuncular admirer

that she understood and appreciated this resumption of his original character.

Brooke listened with profound attention, not only to the spoken words, but to the vocal inflections, which were, as a running commentary, elucidating their text. He felt unusually watchful and suspicious; a curious uneasy consciousness of mischief brewing seemed to sting his perceptive faculties into supernatural acuteness, while he softly stroked the little terrier, the tiny creature sniffing and trembling as if to acknowledge and accept his attentions.

Meanwhile Miss Stretton was cross-examining Kharapet as to the routine of domestic life at Lady Kilconquhar's, and Mrs. Harding and Mr. Robinson were discussing the preliminaries of a proposed book-club. None of them heeded the young lancer, who, raising his eyes to Stasie with the smiling, affectionate expression they generally wore when looking at her, asked, "And when are we to begin our rides? I have made the groom use a side-saddle and tie a horse-cloth round him when exercising Cedric. He will carry you first-rate, Miss Verner, and steady as a rock."



"Thank you," returned Stasie, looking at him dreamily, while she twisted one of Pearl's ears. "I do not know how it is, but I seem to have lost my fancy for riding—I do not feel up to it."

"Why? how is that?" cried the young lancer, dismayed. "It is scarcely a fortnight since you were full of it. Why, it is the very thing for you. Don't *you* think so Dr. Brooke?"

Brooke did not reply at once. He looked very earnestly into Stasie's eyes, his own darkening with an expression of anxiety, while she answered: "I really cannot tell. I tried to ride poor old Brownie—Mrs. Harding's horse—a quiet thing that is often in the cart, and though he only walked, I grew giddy and my heart beat. I felt as if I must fall off at every step he took, though Miles was leading the horse."

"If you would only try Cedric you would not fear—he goes so smooth and steadily," cried Pearson. "Of course a brute out of a cart would be enough to dislocate you; and, I flatter myself, you would have more confidence in me than in Miles."

"I am not so sure," said Stasie, laughing.

"Miles was walking beside me and holding poor Brownie's head; *you* would be careering on another horse and obliged to take care of it as well as of mine."

"I think I might be able to manage so much."

"It is rather disgraceful to confess it, but just now I do not feel as if I *could* mount a horse," returned Stasie, still smiling, but with a slight trembling of the lip, which Brooke thought showed that tears were as near as laughter.

"I am quite sure all these fancies would pass away if you once found yourself mounted on a well-broken steady horse. Don't you agree with me, Dr. Brooke?"

"I do not," returned Brooke, who had leant back and crossed his arms on his chest, with an air of thought. "If Miss Verner persisted in following your advice against her inclination it might turn her against riding altogether. You have been here too long, Miss Verner; you should have change—sea air, sea-bathing would soon enable you to surmount these terrors."

He looked at her with a grave kind smile, that somehow irritated Stasie.

"I am afraid I am growing fanciful—and—and ridiculous. If I were obliged to run about and earn my bread, I should be all right, I dare say."

"Perhaps so," said Brooke.

"I tell you what you'll do, Miss Verner," cried Pearson joyously; "come down to South-sea for a while. It is a capital place. My mother is going to take a house there next month, and she will be quite delighted to have you with her."

"Are you sure?" said Stasie frankly, and looking straight at him with great composure. "*I should* like to go, if Lady Pearson would care to have me."

"Of course she would," said Pearson emphatically.

"Where are you going, Stasie," asked Khara-pet, who had been listening to their talk under cover of some long sentences from Miss Stretton anent "the impossibility (as you must see yourself, my dear sir) of paying *all* the household expenses, even our occasional little hospitalities, out of the rather restricted allowance Mr. Harding sees fit to make. Surely you have

as good a right to regulate these matters as he ?” etc. etc.

“ Oh ! I do not know that I am going anywhere ; but Mr. Pearson says he will ask his mother to invite me to Southsea. If she is so kind, I should like to go.”

“ My dear Stasie,” cried Miss Stretton, “ you are really too much the *ingénue*. I do not know what Mr. Pearson will think of your coolly engaging him to get you an invitation from his mother.”

“ You know what I think,” said the lancer, in a very low and confidential tone.

Stasie gave him a little nod as she replied, “ I do not think I have said anything wrong, auntie ; Mr. Pearson began it.”

“ It would do you good, dear niece, to have change of scene,” said Kharapet, blandly, as he rose and approached. “ If you desire it, why not take an abode ? Your aunt and some of your servants might accompany you.”

As he spoke, Kharapet, as if to testify his complete reconciliation to his adopted niece, essayed to stroke Pearl. Not liking animals, and exceedingly distrustful, he touched the little

creature with a sort of nervous hesitation which offended or annoyed the small favourite in some mysterious way, for the dog, after showing his teeth, which Brooke only noticed, suddenly turned and caught the Syrian's finger between them, inflicting a scratch. Kharapet turned greenly white and snatched away his hand. Miss Stretton started up with a scream. Stasie slapped Pearl soundly and set him down, when he retired growling under the sofa, and, catching Kharapet's hand in both her own, began to examine it with hearty expressions of regret and sympathy. "I do not think it is much, Hormuz," she said; "and I am sure you fidgeted Pearl, touching him as you did."

"He is a venomous beast," returned Hormuz viciously, yet struggling to preserve his soft composure. "He should be put to death. It is dangerous for yourself, my dear Stasie, to have so bloodthirsty an animal constantly near you. Believe me, you had better have him destroyed."

"Excuse me, Mr. Kharapet," cried Mr. Pearson much offended. "If Miss Verner does not care to keep the dog she had better return him to *me*. I don't want the little beggar put out of

the way. I am fond of him myself, and would not have given him to any one but Miss Verner."

"I do care to keep him; he is the dearest little dog!" cried Stasie; while Miss Stretton fussed about the sufferer.

"Dear Mr. Kharapet, I am so distressed; it is quite alarming! Do come upstairs and bathe your hand. Ring the bell, Mr. Robinson; oh! call Susan, or would you like Bhoo dhoo to attend you, Mr. Kharapet?"

"I thank you," returned the Syrian gravely as he contemplated his injured hand. "It seems but a scratch, yet it is well to be prudent. I will take your advice, dear lady," and he left the room with an air of being quite at home, which completed young Pearson's annoyance.

"I never saw a fellow in such a funk!" he exclaimed, looking after him. "Come out, you small culprit," he continued, dragging Pearl from under the sofa where he had taken refuge. "I hope you do not think yourself obliged to keep him, Miss Verner. If you are afraid of him I am quite ready to take him back. By Jove! I don't like to trust the dog with your Eastern friend. He looks quite equal to put anything

out of the way that crossed him ;” and he stroked Pearl affectionately.

Miss Stretton had fortunately left the room to see that properly boiling water had been taken up to the injured man, and so was saved from hearing this blasphemy. Mr. Robinson and Mrs. Harding laughed at the young man’s earnestness, and Stasie exclaimed : “ But *I* am not afraid of him, Mr. Pearson ! You shall not take him back ; he is a naughty little beauty ! Why did you try to bite poor Mr. Kharapet ? ” taking the dog in her arms.

The little creature, whimpering, put its paws on her shoulder, as if begging pardon with a world of imploring in its pathetic eyes.

“ The promptings of instinct, perhaps, as in the case of the groom,” said Brooke gently, with a smile, as he watched the effect of his words on Stasie.

She flushed up. “ You are both of you very rude, and not at all witty ! Do you forget that Hormuz, after Aunt Clem, is in a sense my next of kin ? He is not ‘ rough and tough ’ like Joe Bagstock and the typical Englishman ; but though he is gentle and considerate, he may be just as brave and true as the best of you ! ”

“One for his Nob!” exclaimed Mr. Pearson incisively, out of his cribbage experiences. “That is a little hard on Dr. Brooke and myself, but I am sure we are both disposed to kiss the rod, and I am delighted to leave Pearl with you; only do take care of him. I shouldn’t like the poor little fellow to be poisoned!”

“You are quite incorrigible,” cried Stasie.

“Come, that is really too strong,” said Mr. Robinson.

“Perhaps,” uttered Mrs. Harding with quiet emphasis. There was a pause; Stasie looked vexed till her eyes suddenly encountered Pearson’s, who was looking at her with a penitent expression, half comic, half rueful, when she burst into a natural, healthy, pleasant laugh, which seemed to restore every one to ease and good-humour. “I am afraid I cannot wait to see the result of Miss Stretton’s treatment,” said Mrs. Harding, rising. “I have one or two letters to write before post-time, so will bid you good-bye.”

Brooke also rose. “I trust I shall have good accounts of the sufferer when I come again,” he said, smiling, “and pray take care of the formid-



able animal, Miss Verner. May I venture to give him a farewell pat?"

He stroked the little creature as he spoke, and the dog accepted the caress with evident satisfaction.

"Ah! you are evidently the right sort, Dr. Brooke," said the young lancer. "As Pearl approves, why, I would not mind trusting you to get change of a sovereign!"

"Will you call at the parsonage later?" asked Mr. Robinson.

"I will," returned Brooke, as he followed Mrs. Harding out of the room.

"Well?" asked Mrs. Harding, when they had walked some little way in silence. Brooke did not hear her, he was lost in thought. Mrs. Harding glanced at him and resumed, "How do you think Stasie is looking?"

"I do not know," he replied abruptly, with a start.

"How?" asked Mrs. Harding, a little surprised at the indefiniteness of his answer.

"I mean," collecting himself, "that I do not quite know what to think. She is not looking ill in one sense, but she is not well; she ought to have change of air and scene. Get her away."



## CHAPTER XII.

BROOKE was much too practical and worldly a man to be troubled by sentimental or imaginative worries, yet he found himself haunted to an almost painful degree by a vivid recollection of Stasie Verner's face, her expression, and, above all, by the brilliant yet strained look in her eyes.

She was somewhat changed too in other ways—a little more guarded, a little more impatient than when he first met her—less of a schoolgirl—less light-hearted. This was but natural. Four or five months at her age are equivalent to years later on; still he could not resist the impression that she was neither so happy nor so much at ease as formerly. That the greatest change of all was towards himself he felt rather than acknowledged. She was frank and friendly, and quite glad to see him, but all the old eagerness to talk

to him, to hang on his words, to bring every doubt, every aspiration to him for solution or direction, all this ardent seeking of his guidance, which had half flattered half amused him, had entirely disappeared. She neither sought nor avoided him. She liked to talk with him as she would to any pleasant acquaintance, but she had closed like a mimosa, retired into some citadel, the existence of which he had not suspected, where she defied intrusion or inspection. It was strange the effect produced by this dropping of a semi-transparent veil before the visible evolution of a pure strong heart or mind—or both in one—from formless childhood into ripening womanliness; the sense of amusement vanished, and in its place came an eager longing for the unhesitating confidence once so freely given, an ardent, almost passionate desire, to be welcomed and sought, as in the earlier stages of their acquaintance.

Added to this was a curious indefinable uneasiness respecting Stasie's surroundings, for which, had Brooke been a younger man, he might have laughed at himself. But he had known his inner "ego" long enough and well

enough to respect its promptings, he therefore listened, in a judicial spirit, to its suggestions, that Stasie Verner was in a very defenceless position. The genteel debility of her elderly aunt offered but a poor rampart against the schemes and pretensions of the Syrian executor. Mrs. Harding was kind, faithful, clever, but too enslaved to be of much use. Mr. Harding was blind, and deaf, and dumb, and brutish from excess of animal selfishness. Stasie's only other friends, Mrs. Mathews and her daughter, were powerless; and here among these contending currents of low motive, selfish passion, avarice, and greed, the nobly-planned, graceful, girlish nature, so richly freighted, so sweet, so fair, must drift without watch or pilot. What would become of her?

And Kharapet! He was inclined to mock himself for the intense dislike and fear which had sprung up within him towards the gentle Eastern. He must have been rejected, or whence had the feelings arisen which betrayed themselves in the glance of deadly hatred which Brooke had noticed.

The only pleasant item in Stasie's environ-

ment was the gay, boyish, young soldier, and Robinson, though *he* did not count for much.

Pearson was bright and attractive, and Stasie evidently liked him. Yet Brooke could not divest himself of a fear that by fair means or foul Kharapet would possess himself of the bright girl and, what he valued most, her money. "By fair means *or* foul"—the words kept ringing in Brooke's ears, a sort of echo repeating and emphasising the last.

Troubled and absorbed by these impressions, and finding no one at the deserted club, or indeed in town at that depopulated period to divert his thoughts, he soon found his way back to Sefton Park and Stasie. The little station, the road to the parsonage, had grown quite familiar. He felt a curious mixture of attraction to the place, and a wish to take Stasie out of it, away to some distant region where she would be safe from selfish schemers and unhealthy influences.

She would be a charming travelling companion, with her intelligent curiosity, her vivid sense of enjoyment; and how pleasant to the eye—but here the doctor pulled himself up. How was it that he allowed this folly get the better of him?

For form's sake he called on his clerical school-mate, but of course Robinson was out ; and he then, with unconsciously quickened step, proceeded to Limeville.

"Miss Stretton has gone to town, but Miss Verner is at home," said the servant who answered his ring. Brooke heard the sound of music from within, and followed the neat Mary to the drawing-room.

Stasie was sitting at the piano when he entered, and rose to meet him cordially with something of the welcome in her eyes he used to read there.

"I am glad you have come," she said simply. "I am all alone to-day ; I feel dull and out of sorts."

"I am glad my visit is well timed," said Brooke, while he held her hand perhaps for an unnecessary second, looking down into her eyes with a smile that gave sudden tenderness to his strong face, and thinking that she had a thoughtful, even troubled, expression, different from the sunny animation he used to admire. Her rich hair, pushed carelessly back from her brow, was rough, as though she had been lying restlessly against a pillow, and a simple morning dress,

gathered into the waist with a band, showed the incomparable grace of her shoulders. A quick thrill of delight shivered through his veins as Brooke thought that for the next half hour at least he should have her all to himself.

"And it is a long time since we have had an argument, Miss Verner. This is a splendid opportunity," he continued, as he drew a chair near the sofa, where she seated herself. "How is it that they have left you all alone?"

"Oh! Mrs. Harding and Aunt Clem had a quantity of shopping to do, so they went up with Hormuz Kharapet. He was down here yesterday, and stayed the night because he wanted to go to the early service at Mr. Robinson's church this morning."

"Oh, indeed! And you? were you early enough for prayers?"

"No!"—with a shake of the head. "I am so dreadfully lazy of late; that is the reason I did not go to town. I feel quite disgusted with myself sometimes, Dr. Brooke!" With gravity, "Do you think it a very bad sign not liking these perpetual services? they really bore me to death! I don't mind on Sundays, you know, and I like a

good sermon, but the same thing over and over again! It is too much."

"No; I do not think you utterly lost, perhaps because I share your pernicious views."

"But there are the Misses Thompson, and Mr. Williams's nieces—they all live in the park; they never seem happy unless they are running in and out of church, or working for it, and they *are* so good, always going about among the poor, and so nice and gentle, while I—I never seem to like anything that is right—yet somehow I don't feel as if I were quite wrong?"

"I am afraid you are in a very illogical state of mind," replied Brooke solemnly, while his deep-set dark eyes glittered with a pleasant smile. "Indeed, I am afraid, in a dangerous state, for you seem disposed to think for yourself—a terrible tendency for a young lady."

"Why should it be worse for a girl than a boy?" cried Stasie aggressively. "I suppose we have some brains too? though, indeed, my thoughts are terribly tangled. I am only sure of what I feel."

"At all events you have a fair share of brains to make the distinction. Do not fear, Miss



Verner, you will think clearly enough by and by; be content for the present to enjoy your youth."

"That is to say, try and keep a baby as long as you can, which I do not wish to do! Besides, I do not enjoy my youth."

"How so? You seem to possess every qualification for enjoyment."

"Yes," with some hesitation; "I am rather unreasonable and ungrateful not to be more contented, when I have so much that others need; but somehow I am not! You see I lead a selfish, useless life. I get sick of the poor people; they are greedy and uninteresting. I know I should be better if I were compelled to do some work, even if I disliked it, by somebody or something that I cared to obey. Of course I like to indulge myself, and I do not think I have the spirit of a martyr; but I don't want to live altogether for self. You will think I can talk of nothing else!"

"I am interested. Tell me, what would you like to do?"

"For myself? I scarcely know; but I will tell you what I should like." A pause.

"Yes, tell me!" drawing a little nearer with *an air of profound attention*.

“Well,” resting an elbow on her knee and her chin in the hollow of her hand, “I should like to send Mr. Harding on a long, long tour to all the commercial capitals of the world, where he should make a lot of money, and not come back for six, even, ten years, so that dear Mrs. Harding should have a little happiness before *her* youth is quite gone.”

“Ah! that is a scheme I would gladly assist,” cried Brooke, “with this improvement—that Harding should *never* come back.”

His animated trenchant tone struck Stasie, whose colour rose as she looked earnestly at him. Then, averting her eyes, she said, “Yes, her life has been cruel. I do love Mrs. Harding, she is so wise and kind! How delightful to be brought up by a mother like her! How could she have married such a man?”

“Women rarely have the faintest notion what the real man is whom they marry. How can they?” said Brooke.

“That is awful!” remarked Stasie softly, as if to herself. There was a pause. She leant back against the sofa-cushions, fitting together in her actively-working brain Miss Stretton’s hints re-

specting Brooke's attachment to his cousin and the sudden energy of his words respecting Mr. Harding. Brooke, too, was thinking that he had perhaps spoken too freely, when a deep sigh from Stasie startled him.

She was lying back and deadly pale, her hand pressed to the left side, the fingers twitching in a curious way.

"You are ill," cried Brooke, starting up. "Tell me, are you in pain?" She did not reply, but her strained wide-opened eyes stared at him with an expression of fear.

"Stasie!" he said much alarmed and struck by her symptoms, but reluctant to call any aid. "Don't you know me?"

"Yes, yes, Hormuz!" she muttered in a thick voice unlike her usual tone; "I am sorry, but it is no use. I cannot love you; don't be angry!" Then her eyes closed.

Brooke rang the bell loudly. "Have you any brandy at hand?" he asked, as the servant entered.

"I am not sure, sir; dear, dear, what's the matter, sir?"

"Miss Verner seems faint. Get the brandy, quick."

The girl, looking scared, ran off, and soon returned with a bottle and wine glass. "The cellarette is locked, sir, but this is a drop cook had for flavouring."

Brooke half filled the wine glass, and with some difficulty made Stasie swallow the greater part of it. Gradually the nervous twitching of her hands ceased, her colour came slowly back, and with a deep sigh she tried to sit up.

Brooke took her hand to feel the pulse, but she snatched it back in a strange terrified way. He softly took it again. She did not resist, and her strained eyes grew smaller and less distressed. With a heavy sigh she seemed to come to herself. "Ah, how strange!" she murmured, "everything seemed to fade away, and then to come back and close round me." She shuddered, and sighed again. "Did I faint, Mary?"

"Yes'm, worse than you did that time in your own room!"

"Had Miss Verner an attack of this kind before?" asked Brooke eagerly.

"Not near so bad, sir, but very like; it was only a minute or two."

"When?"

"Oh, near ten days ago, and Miss Verner would not have me, on no account, tell Miss Stretton, because she has been so worried about taking medicine, and Mr. Kharapet was in such a taking."

"You feel better now?" asked Brooke, his eyes fixed on her face in closest scrutiny.

"Yes, yes; nearly quite well; that dreadful giddiness and beating of the heart is gone; it was frightful!"

"Would you like to go and lie down?"

"No, thank you, I am all right now. I will go out presently and see Mademoiselle and the children."

"It will do you good, but wait a few minutes."

Mary retired with the bottle.

"May I stay and walk with you?"

"Oh yes, if you like." A pause. "I do not care to be alone. I am so glad I am going to Lady Pearson's next week. I shall enjoy the sea. I have not seen it for so long."

"Yes, a change to the sea-side will make you quite well."

"Do you really think so? How delightful! for, do you know, I am tired feeling odd and

unwell. I cannot describe how, and poor Dr. Hunter's medicine does not do me one bit of good."

"How do you feel, Miss Verner?"

"Oh! dizzy, and faint sometimes, and so restless at night, and then I have odd fancies. I know they are unreal, and I will *not* yield to them, but it is hard to resist;" then with a change of tone, "perhaps it is only indigestion?"

"Only indigestion," echoed Brooke. "You don't know what a fiend indigestion is! What have you eaten to-day?"

"I had a chop for my luncheon; but I could not eat it, and I had a pear, and some little bits of helwa."

"Helwa! that is an Eastern sweet?"

"Yes! it is delicious. Bhoo dhoo makes it for me, and another kind—with flour and honey—something like rahat lakoum, but not quite the same."

"Bhoo dhoo makes them!" repeated Brooke as if lost in thought; then, rousing himself, said pleasantly, "Do you never share these goodies? I am rather fond of such things."

"Oh yes, you shall have as much as you like; bring me that *bonbonnière* that is on the piano."

Brooke obeyed, and Stasie opened and presented it to him. "They are differently flavoured, some with fleur d'orange and some with cocoa-nut. No one likes cocoa-nut but me. It is one of the few things I remember at Mardin. Do you like it?"

"Not much. However, I will try some of both, if you will allow me," helping himself, but not eating either.

"I will give you a piece of paper to wrap them in, they are sticky." She rose from her seat, and made a step forward, then, stopping short, put her hand to her head. "I am still giddy," she said. "I never was so bad as this before," sitting down again.

"Have you often been similarly affected?" asked Brooke, with deep though disguised anxiety.

"No! only once or twice, but very slightly, and I got quite right in a few minutes to-day. Oh! I must not fancy myself worse than I am. I will go and put on my hat. I quite long for some fresh air. Do you think you gave me too much brandy?"

"I do not think so; let me prescribe."

“Oh no!” she cried, her usual animation returning, and a quick faint blush rising on her cheek. “Oh no, I want you for a pleasant friend—not a doctor, who would make me take things and do things I don’t like.”

“Might I not be friend and physician too?” asked Brooke, struck by her evident shrinking from him in his professional character.

“No, no!” reiterated Stasie; “you cannot be both. I do not like doctors—I mean,” colouring at her own thoughtless speech, “I do not like them as doctors.”

“I should be very vexed if I thought you disliked me,” said Brooke earnestly.

“But I do not,” said Stasie frankly. “I was vexed with you once——” she paused and raised her eyes with a sweet arch look to his—“because you thought I had such bad taste as to engage myself to poor Bob Mathews! You know you did; and you showed pretty plainly what you thought of me.”

“I was a dense idiot to misunderstand you,” cried Brooke warmly. “Will you allow me humbly to beg you pardon, and more, grant it?” He held out his hand; Stasie hesitated half an instant and



then gave him hers. Brooke held it, gently but closely, looking at her with deepest attention. "You are feeling more yourself, I see."

"Ah!" cried Stasie, struck by the grave tenderness of his manner, "you are anxious about me, Dr. Brooke: you think me very ill. Believe me, it will not signify much. I have always been so well, it seems impossible that I should be really ill. I shall get quite strong, quite myself, when I go to Lady Pearson's."

"I believe so too," returned Brooke, greatly touched by this struggle of a strong generous vitality against the evident indisposition that oppressed her. "Stay as long as you can. When do you go?"

"Next Thursday."

"That is nearly a week off. I shall come down and see you again before you go, if you will allow me? And, Miss Verner, pray confide in Mrs. Harding; she is truly attached to you, and I need not tell you how kind, how considerate—in short, I know few like her."

"Nor I," returned Stasie thoughtfully. "Now I will put on my things, and you will kindly walk with me to Sefton House. I will stay with

Mademoiselle Aubert and the children till Mrs. Harding and Aunt Clem come back. I don't want to be alone."

"You are right, Miss Verner. You suggested indigestion as a possible cause of your illness. Suppose you avoid these Eastern sweets for a few days?"

"Very well, I will let you prescribe so much," said Stasie as she left the room.

She was soon equipped.

"It is dark and threatening," said Brooke, looking through the window; "still I think the air will do you good."

"I am sure of that. I do not mind a wetting in the least."

As they passed through the hall, Bhoo dhoo was there removing the dead leaves and twigs from some plants which decorated it. He paused, and, turning, saluted Stasie with dignified deference.

"Missee not well? Missee better now? Me make nice dish for missee's supper; the house all sick when missee Sahib sick," he said, raising his hand to his head.

"Oh, I am quite well again, Bhoo dhoo," returned Stasie, smiling kindly on him.

The man bowed, and, raising his eyes, they met those of Brooke. He stood gazing as if fascinated, until Brooke followed Stasie through the door out of sight.

"Really," she said, as they walked leisurely towards Sefton House, "I feel quite regal with so devoted a 'personal attendant' as Bhoodhoo. The poor fellow has quite attached himself to me. You know, he used to be at Mardin, and knew me as a little child."

"Indeed! but he has the look of one of those nondescript Bombay fellows that will do any work."

"Yes, he came from Bombay, I believe, to my stepfather at Mardin, so Hormuz says."

Brooke made no reply, and they said little more till they reached Mr. Harding's house. Here Brooke made his adieux somewhat lingeringly, though he refused to come in and see Willie and Ethel.

"On Saturday or Sunday I will run down to see Mrs. Harding," said Brooke, careful not to alarm Stasie by any exhibition of anxiety, "and I shall, I hope, find you all right and blooming."

"Thank you," she returned, while she thought, "Had Mrs. Harding been at home he would have

found time to come in. Poor Mrs. Harding, what a pity they were parted !”

Having watched his companion enter the porch, Brooke turned away and walked a few paces slowly, as if in deep thought, towards the railway station ; then he stopped, drew a time-table from his breast-pocket, and studied it for a minute or two ; next he looked at his watch, and then struck away down the embowered avenue at a steady pace, as if he had to do a certain distance within a given time. At the foot of the hill in which the avenue ended he encountered Mr. Robinson, who greeted him cordially :

“So sorry to have missed you, Brooke. I suppose you have been at the parsonage. Where are you going ? you are turning your back on the station.”

“I am going to take the train at Welwood. There is no one at Sefton Park to-day except Miss Verner, and I have talked to her till she is tired, and has taken refuge with the French governess and the children, so I thought a quick walk would do me good.”

“I daresay it will. It is over three miles to the Welwood railway station. I wish I could

come with you, but I have to meet the architect and Mr. Williams at four-thirty. They are going to make a push at last about a permanent church."

"I will not keep you then: see you soon again;" and Brooke strode on with a far-off look in his eyes, and his brows knit in deepest thought.

The road led through an undulating country richly wooded, studded with charming villas in the highest condition of care and cultivation, and interspersed with breezy commons.

Brooke scarce noticed these pleasant features. He walked like a man occupied by a set purpose; but though his pace was good—three miles an hour—the shades of a dull evening were closing round him before he reached the village of Welwood, and a slow drizzle, more mist than rain, began to fall.

He did not go direct to the railway station, however, though in time to catch the four-forty-five up train, but, turning into the post-office, which was also a general shop, he asked his way to Dr. Hunter's residence.

Of course on reaching it the owner was out,

but an elderly servant said her master would soon be in, and begged the visitor to sit down and wait his return.

Brooke accepted the invitation ; he was shown into a somewhat dingy back-parlour, and supplied with a local paper. Time seemed to go very slowly for the next twenty minutes. Brooke was unusually restless ; he rose and walked to and fro, he returned to his chair, he took up the newspaper and threw it down again ; at last sounds of a door opening, of heavy footsteps approaching, told him his *mauvais quart d'heure* was over ; next a stout elderly man, exceedingly neat in attire, rosy of face, with a fringe of nice white hair round a bald space on the top of his head entered and saluted him with old-fashioned politeness.

Brooke introduced himself as a relative of Mrs. Harding. Dr. Hunter bowed, and Brooke continued : “ I have ventured to trespass on your time in order to tell you of a sudden attack of faintness from which Miss Verner suffered this afternoon, for two reasons—first, because I am, both on Mrs. Harding’s account and for other reasons interested in the young lady ; secondly,

because I thought you might like a professional account of the seizure."

"Certainly, certainly. I am much obliged to you."

Brooke accordingly proceeded to give an accurate account of the symptoms he had noticed in Stasie, and succeeded in drawing Dr. Hunter into a dissertation on "the case."

Of course the conversation bristled with technicalities; but the elder physician was little disturbed by the younger medico's report. "An ordinary case, my dear sir; quite an ordinary case. The young lady is low. She has scarce come to her full strength, she is consequently slightly feverish, perhaps a little hysterical, and inclined to yield to any tendency to coma; nothing more common with young ladies. I see," glancing at Brooke's card, "that you are a military surgeon, you have therefore not much experience in this class of disorder. But I assure you, I have not seen the smallest cause for uneasiness to Miss Verner's friends. It must be six weeks since I was first called in, and she is decidedly better. There may be a little weakness about the heart. Mr. Kharapet, that Eastern

gentleman who is frequently at Sefton Park, tells me the young lady's mother died of heart disease. But really there is not much the matter with her."

"Then you feel quite sure there are no exceptional symptoms?"

"Perfectly certain, my dear sir; and you may tell Mrs. Harding so. It is one of those cases where medicine is of little avail. Time and, above all, change of scene, are the best remedies. I meet such instances every day, sir, every day."

"Then I will detain you no longer," said Brooke, rising, "and can only reiterate my excuses for occupying your valuable time. One word more, may I depend on your silence respecting this visit? I do not care to appear in the eyes of Mrs. Harding and her friend as a stupid alarmist; moreover, my visit might make Miss Verner uneasy if it came to her ears."

"Trust me, trust me," replied Dr. Hunter cordially. "We doctors can keep secrets; but you may make your mind easy, it is a common case, quite a common case." With much courtesy he escorted Brooke to the door, and watched him go away into the damp darkness with a heart as gloomy as the weather.





## CHAPTER XIII.

WHEN Brooke reached Waterloo Station, he made a hasty dinner in the refreshment-room, and then drove straight to his lodgings.

It was a dark, damp night. He was glad to draw up an easy-chair and to stir the fire into a blaze. After pondering for some time with painful intensity on the symptoms he had noticed in Miss Verner, on the evident indications that her health had been deteriorating since she had gone to reside at Sefton Park, he started to his feet and went to the sideboard, on which stood a large tin despatch-box. Unlocking this, he took out a thick manuscript-book, his journal, and re-established himself before the fire. Opening the volume, he sought through its pages till he found certain entries, and read as follows :—

“ *March 26, 18—*.—A messenger came into cantonments this morning from the Nawaub Assamodoolah, a Talookdar

of Oudh, living some koss away from Lucknow, requesting medical aid for his son, who was seriously ill.

“Dr. C. begged me to accompany him, as he did not care to go alone. The old man begins to doubt his own nerve.

“A long tiresome ride brought us to the Nawaub’s abode, where, after some delay, we were admitted into his presence. He received us graciously, but under his oriental calm and dignity of manner I could see that he was oppressed by deep anxiety.

“He explained at some length the illness of his son—his restlessness, his sleepless nights, his constant nausea, and frequent palpitations; while the last symptoms, cold sweats and slight convulsions, had frightened the father into seeking help from the English doctor.

“Dr. C., after putting some questions respecting the earlier stages of the malady, proposed to see the sufferer.”

A short description of the apartment adjoining the zenana where the boy lay followed, and then the entry continued:

“Dr. C. requested me to examine the boy, a handsome little fellow of eight or nine years old. I found him very weak, skin hot and burning, very irregular action of the heart, respiration markedly hurried and labouring, while the dilated pupil of the eye and glassy look struck me as peculiar, as were also slight convulsive movements of the limbs, occurring at intervals.

“I could find no apparent cause for the symptoms. We inquired into the patient’s previous condition, his diet, etc., from the women around the charpoy, as the boy seemed

dull and averse to speak. I felt fairly puzzled. Dr. C., I could see, was also in the dark. After a short consultation we agreed that a sedative draught to allay the general irritability was all that could be done. This we compounded on the spot, having brought medicines with us, and left directions for its use.

"On returning to the apartment where the Nawaub had received us, Dr. C. asked who attended to the sick boy? A simple question, which the father answered with some elaboration. The boy's mother, his nurse, a bearer devoted to his service, cared, cooked for, and watched over him.

"After the usual offering of scents and sweetmeats, not omitting sundry gold mohurs, we rode away.

"Talking over the peculiar features of the case and the difficulty of accounting for them, Dr. C. surprised me by exclaiming, 'But there, it is no use conjecturing—the boy is being poisoned. He is the Nawaub's favourite son, and his mother's enemies or his own are doing away with him. Nor is there any use in making a disturbance, for we could never prove anything.' Whereupon he proceeded to describe an alcoholoid poison much used by Thugs, which is so quickly absorbed, so rapidly evaporated, that it does not leave a trace after an hour or two. This he felt sure had been administered."

Brooke turned a page, and read under date of March 28 :

"News reached us this afternoon that the Nawaub's son died in convulsions about dawn, and my syce, who had accompanied me on our expedition, speaking of the event,

observed: 'It would have taken many doctor Sahibs to have cured the *chokra* when he stood in the way of his elder brother.'

Brooke laid down his journal, and, leaning back, recalled to his mind all he had noticed in Stasie that day. The strained, dilated eyes, the faint but perceptible quiver of the under lid; the faintness, the wandering words that betrayed Kharapet's avowal to her, and served as a commentary on his look of hatred which had impressed itself upon Brooke's memory; the twitching hands, the palpitating heart, the relief from alcohol.

These were startling coincidences.


Still, with all the belief in an Eastern's capability for crime, natural to an Englishman who had had rare opportunities for seeing below the surface, Brooke hesitated to believe that Kharapet would dare the tremendous risk of attempting to poison Stasie Verner, surrounded as she was by all the security of a family, English servants, the safe routine of a well-ordered house.

True, the introduction of a Bombay servant was suspicious; but, even with his aid, how difficult to administer any poison that should

affect only one out of a household that partook of the same food, the same drink.

At this point, Brooke bethought him of the morsels of helwa he had carried away. Stasie said that no one liked the flavour of cocoa-nut save herself. It was now more than an hour since he had eaten ; he would experiment on himself. A dose that could affect a slight girl, scarce yet come to her full strength, would be a mere indication for him, but with his experience a mere indication would suffice. He took the paper from his pocket and unfolded it. As he did so, the remembrance of Stasie's slender white hands, still trembling as she wrapped it up, came back to him vividly, thrilling his heart with a sweet passionate yearning. The thought that a creature so fair, so young, so generous and defenceless, should be the victim of a foul attempt, sent icy darts shivering through his veins from head to heel. Whatever of doubt or hesitation had hitherto stayed him vanished before the rising glow of love and tenderness. He loved Stasie—loved her truly, purely—and, whether from schemes against her life or her happiness, he would save her at any risk to

himself. Having eaten two of the largest fragments of the helwa, he again took up his journal, turning over many leaves hastily, till he found another entry on the topic then occupying his mind. The colonel's favourite syce had been taken violently ill, with symptoms strongly resembling *delirium tremens*, which in a wine-abjuring native were extraordinary. A curious combination of circumstances led to strong suspicion that poison had been administered to him by a man of lower caste, also in the employment of the colonel, with whom he had had a quarrel. The syce died, but no trace of poison could on examination be found. Farther on Brooke found notes of undoubted cases of poison by Dhatura Stramonium in the Jamsetjee Jeejeebhoy Hospital in Bombay. He studied all the details with intense painful reflection, and recalled other and slighter particulars imprinted on his memory, the conviction growing on him that the subtle poison he feared, would produce in small doses exactly the same effects as he had remarked that day in Stasie Verner. He closed his book, and set himself to review the position.



He had long ago seen that Kharapet was in love, in his crawling slimy fashion, with Stasie; and seen too that for a while she was unconscious or careless of the effect she had produced, while her frank friendliness was quite misunderstood by the Syrian, whose two strongest passions were centred in her—greed for money and greed for herself. That she had rejected him, probably more than once, Brooke gathered from Stasie's wandering words when half unconscious. He felt inclined to think she was now the object of one of those deadly murderous passions which more than anything else is suggestive of hell and the devil! Then, if Stasie died unmarried and under age, her fortune would be Kharapet's. Here was a tremendous temptation to use the power of silently, safely inflicting death; nor did Brooke doubt that, with his experience of Indian life, Kharapet possessed this power. It was remarkable too that he had told Dr. Hunter Stasie's mother died of heart disease; Brooke determined to try and ascertain if this was true. But, above all, the most suspicious circumstance was the introduction of the man Bhoodhoo. Without some such tool Kharapet could not,

unless at a great risk, attempt to tamper with Miss Verner's life. All the circumstances seemed to fit in to the diabolical design Brooke suspected. And, if he were right, what could he do to counteract it?

He rose and paced the room, striving to see another side to the picture that his imagination presented in such strong colours.

Kharapet was a successful man. He had made a hit in London society of a very good class. He seemed in no want of funds; but this point was extremely uncertain; he might even aspire to a wealthy wife other than Stasie Verner. Brooke knew the somewhat exaggerated value placed by Europeanised Orientals on social success in England. Could Kharapet be so short-sighted as to risk the loss of all this, the chance of a painful and ignominious exit from this mortal life, by committing a hideous crime. Surely calculation, self-interest, would keep him back.

Like most men who have been much in the East, Brooke had a very low estimate of Oriental morality, and was disposed to credit Kharapet with capability for base and cruel crime; *but* he



also counted more certainly on the deterrent power of his cowardice. No ; it was impossible he could entertain so dangerous, so difficult a design.

“I am hipped and out of sorts myself,” thought Brooke, “or I should not be so ready to accept these horrible fancies for possibilities. I must persuade Mrs. Harding to take Stasie to Filmer. That Welwood doctor is an old woman. Now I can venture to speak to Filmer. But suppose this nightmare-idea of mine were right, what could I do for Miss Verner ? I see nothing for it but to marry her ! Ay ; but for that two consents are necessary ! and time—time is all important.”

Again he lost himself in uneasy, indistinct thought, not without gleams of delicious hope. At length, rousing up, he looked at his watch. “It is more than two hours since I swallowed that stuff, and I do not feel the smallest discomfort, the slightest sensation that I could construe into a symptom. I may be wrong, quite wrong. I trust in God I am. If I do injustice to that sneaking Syrian, I beg his pardon. At the same time I wish he might never offend my sense of

the fitness of things by entering the same room with Stasie Verner."

Though a man of strong common sense and considerable self-control, Brooke found himself unable to regain his usual tranquil, equable condition of mind. The struggle went on perpetually in his brain between the memory of Stasie's attack and its possible cause, and his more everyday view that such a solution was in the highest degree improbable. The third day he could stand it no longer, and made his way at an earlier hour than usual, to Mrs. Harding first.

He found her prepared to start for London, in order to meet Johnnie and escort him home for a couple of days' holiday. She was looking bright, or at least less depressed than formerly.

"I am sorry to leave you, Jim, but I am afraid of losing the train, and Johnnie will be looking out for me. I am in hopes he is greatly improved, he writes such nice letters."

"I am glad to hear it! Boys are queer, unaccountable creatures; one can never calculate how they will turn out. I suppose Harding is in town?"

"Yes. He is rather busy just now. Some Bombay friends of Mr. Kharapet's are in London, and occupy him a good deal."

"And how is Miss Verner? She seemed very unwell when I was down here last."

"So she told me, and I felt quite uneasy about her; but she is certainly better, and in high spirits at the idea of going to stay with Lady Pearson. She goes to Southsea the day after to-morrow."

"I am delighted to hear it; nothing will do her so much good as change of air. When she returns, Livy, if you are still anxious, you must take her to Filmer—Sir Harcourt Filmer."

"Then you think she is really unwell?" asked Mrs. Harding anxiously. This conversation took place as they walked down the road to the station, whence Brooke had just come.

"I think prevention better than cure," said Brooke; "and I believe Filmer quite the best man she could go to."

"Are you going to call at Limeville, Jim?"

"Yes, of course. Shall I find Kharapet there?"

"No; he has not been down here for several days. Do you know, I think he has given up Stasie

as hopeless. There has been an indefinable change in his manner of late, for the better."

"I am glad of it," returned Brooke drily. "How does he like such a dangerous rival as young Pearson?"

"I do not know; but do you really think him dangerous?"

"How can a man judge of another man's attractions?" said Brooke, laughing. "I can only say, I feel greatly disposed to enter myself for the stakes against him."

"I wish you would," cried Mrs. Harding warmly. "I have always wished you and Stasie would take a fancy to each other."

"At present I do not see the faintest chance for me," said Brooke.

"How do you know till you have tried to win her?" said Mrs. Harding eagerly. "Try, you have my best wishes, and rely on my keeping your council."

"That is all-important," said Brooke, smiling to think how soon his new-formed wishes had forced themselves to his lips. "There—there is the bell; your train is in sight!"

. . . . .

"I declare!" exclaimed Miss Stretton, as she saw Mrs. Harding and Dr. Brooke pass, from the window of a small front room which she called the "study," where she generally wrote her letters and made up her rather confused accounts, and where at that moment she and Stasie were inspecting a new dress-basket just arrived, for the better conveyance of the latter's finery to Southsea. "There is Dr. Brooke with Mrs. Harding. Why, it is barely ten minutes since he went up the road. I suppose he is going back with her to town."

"Very likely," replied Stasie, busying herself with the buckles of the basket. "It will be pleasanter for her than going alone."

"Perhaps so; a good deal pleasanter, I dare say!" said Miss Stretton, not without significance. "Well, Mr. Harding may have his peculiarities and faults, and I know he is not a favourite of yours, Stasie; but I must say he seems to me a most affectionate father, and very fond of his home. I am sure Mrs. Harding has every comfort, and——"

"Man does not live by bread alone, nor woman either," remarked Stasie in a low tone,

while Miss Stretton went on without heeding.

“And I do not see the hardship of going up to town by oneself to fetch one’s boy from school.”

“Nor I, auntie. This is a charming basket; it will take all my dresses. I hope Lady Pearson will not think I have come to make a settlement in her house when she sees such a formidable amount of luggage.”

“I am sure she would be very pleased if you did,” said Miss Stretton; and proceeded to deliver herself of much good advices touching the necessity of guarding against being betrayed into any entanglement with young Pearson, who was anything but steady, and who was—Aunt Clem understood—a good deal in debt.

Stasie let her talk on uninterruptedly. She was accustomed to this strain of conversation; she had ceased to fly out at these solemn warnings, to hurl indignant and contemptuous replies against these perpetual assumptions of matrimonial designs in each and every masculine individual who approached them. Moreover, she took the opportunity of turning over in her

mind the probable truth of her aunt's suspicions anent the Platonic friendship which undoubtedly existed between the doctor and Mrs. Harding, not that Stasie was disposed to think evil, but she knew what a cruel suppressed life Mrs. Harding's was. She saw what an interesting woman her friend must be, especially to a man who had once felt more than cousinly regard for her. She remembered the emphatic wish uttered by Brooke only three days before, that Mr. Harding might never return, and the tender regard for the trust he expressed for his cousin.

It was his sympathy for his early friend that drew him so often first to York Gate and now to Sefton Park, and she, Stasie, must rule her own heart carefully to resist the strange influence—the almost irresistible attraction which the undemonstrative doctor possessed for her—above all, to hide it.

“I know he is good, and clever, and nice,” she thought in the depths of her honest heart, “but if he be not nice for me, I must not care how nice he be. I fancy I let him see too much once, but I did not know what I felt then. Oh! how glad I am to go to Southsea! I shall see

all sorts of nice people there, and in a multitude of fancies as well as counsellors there will be safety."

Miss Stretton had wound up her exordium by a weighty sentence. "Believe me, Stasie, dear, it is not the brilliant butterfly of fashion, the reckless man of fascinating exterior, who can make a woman happy, but rather the man of more unpretending style but of gentle nature, deep feeling, high religious principle, like——"

"Dr. Brooke is in the drawing room, ma'am," said the parlour-maid, opening the door.

Stasie laughed gaily. "That was not the name you were going to finish with, auntie?" she said.

"Certainly not," returned Miss Stretton sharply. "I dare say Dr. Brooke has his principles, but I am sure they are not religious ones. I suppose we must ask him to luncheon."

"Oh, of course; and ask Bhoothoo to make something nice. He could, I believe, out of an old bagpipe, like the man in the story Mr. Robinson told us."

"You had better go to the drawing-room, Stasie. I must really change my cap."



Brooke was playing with Stasie's dog when she went into the room, and he still held the little animal under one arm as he advanced to meet her, looking eagerly into her face as he said :

"Well, Miss Verner, I see you are better. I trust you have had no return of the faintness that frightened me the other day?"

"Oh no! not in the least. I feel better than I have done for some time. What friends Pearl seems to make with you?"

"Yes; he is a nice intelligent little fellow. Has your friend Mr. Kharapet got more reconciled to the formidable animal?"

"I am not quite sure," said Stasie, smiling. "I do not think he is quite comfortable when Pearl is in the room, and Pearl knows it quite well, and is ready to bark and snap and growl in the most absurd way, as if he gloried in frightening Mr. Kharapet. I am afraid Mr. Pearson puts Pearl up to these tricks."

Brooke laughed, put down Pearl, and placed a chair for Stasie where the light would fall on her face.

"No, I will not sit there," she cried. "You want to examine me, and I will not have it!"

"Why?" said Brooke gently. "Are you cross because I am truly anxious to see you once more enjoying the glorious health you seemed to have when first I had the pleasure of meeting you?"

"Yes, it was a cross speech and unreasonable," said Stasie, suddenly conscious of her perversity. "But I have been so badgered about my health, and I am cross and irritable. I do not understand myself. Ah! by the way, have you told Mrs. Harding about my—fainting?"

"No. I did not know your wishes on——"

"Oh! thank you," interrupted Stasie. I forbade Mary to say a word, so now it is all right. There was a pause. Brooke's mind was full of the fair girl who sat opposite to him stroking Pearl in an absent way, and yet no words came to him.

"I am going to Lady Pearson's the day after to-morrow," said Stasie abruptly; "and I feel so delighted; I fancy somehow I shall be quite well there. I like the sea, and I shall hear music—military music—and I don't know how it is, but I feel as if I wanted to escape from this place, though I was quite pleased to come here. I dare say all this seems silly enough to you."

“By no means. The place does not agree with you. I am very glad you are going away; you will come back quite yourself. Do you take the train here or at Waterloo?”

Here Miss Stretton made her appearance, and soon after they went in to luncheon. Before the meal was over Mr. Pearson was announced.

That gentleman entered in some excitement.

“How do you do, Miss Stretton? good-morning, Miss Verner!” “Ah! Dr. Brooke, how are you? I have a letter for you, Miss Verner, from my mother,” producing it. “She is most anxious you should start to-morrow, if possible. There is to be an afternoon dance on board the “Ariadne” on Thursday. She isn’t one of the big ships, so it will be a small jolly private sort of thing, and my mother thinks you would enjoy it greatly. I am going to try for twenty-four hours’ leave, if possible, to run down for it.”

“It would be delightful,” cried Stasie. “Don’t you think we can manage it, auntie?”

But Miss Stretton, who was averse to the whole scheme, made a contradictory indefinite reply.

"I am sure I don't know what to say, dear! Mrs. Harding is away in town, and I expect Mr. Kharapet to dinner to-morrow. Then your things are not all come home."

"Oh! you can send anything that is not ready afterwards," put in Pearson.

"You will have plenty of dances, I dare say," continued Aunt Clem.

"Not so jolly as this one will be."

Here, somewhat to Mr. Pearson's surprise (for he had a vague incipient jealousy of him), Brooke joined in with an emphatic recommendation to Stasie—not to lose so pleasant a chance.

"What matter about going a day sooner or later?" he continued, addressing Miss Stretton, who was visibly disturbed, like a person suddenly placed in unexpected circumstances and at a loss how to act.

"I really do not know what to say! I am sure Mr. Kharapet will not be pleased."

"Considering how evident it is that Miss Verner needs change," said Brooke, "he ought to be very glad that she goes away a day sooner."

"And," put in Stasie with a flash of her natural fire, "I do not care whether Mr. Khara-

pet likes it or not. I know you do not mind really, auntie ; so, Mr. Pearson, I will write a little line to Lady Pearson, and say I will go with pleasure ! It will reach her to-morrow morning, will it not ?”

“That’s right ! I will ride through Welwood on my way back, and post it before three,” cried young Pearson ; “and, Miss Stretton, you’ll have lots of time ; there is a capital train from Waterloo to Portsmouth at four o’clock, arriving at six, or a few minutes after ; that gives you the whole morning.”

“The very thing,” exclaimed Brooke, as Stasie went quickly away to write her note. “And I will meet you at the station to be of any use I can. Ladies often need help at the moment of starting.”

“Oh, I am an experienced traveller myself,” returned Miss Stretton in a querulous tone, for she was infinitely annoyed at being thus swept along against her will, as by the force of an irresistible current. “But it is impossible I can do my duty—the duty expected of me by those who have the right to direct Stasie and her affairs when she opposes me in even the smallest matters.”

“My dear Miss Stretton ! why oppose *her* in so small a matter ! Believe me, Miss Verner’s friends ought to grasp eagerly at whatever offers to do her good, for her health has certainly deteriorated since she came here !”

Brooke uttered these last words with some sharpness and much decision, as he was alone with Miss Stretton, Pearson having followed Stasie to the drawing-room.

Aunt Clem looked up startled.

“Good gracious, Dr. Brooke ! you don’t mean to say that my dear, dear niece is dangerously ill ?” the tears stood in her eyes.

“No, by no means,” returned Brooke, “but pray remember that prevention is much better than cure—perhaps difficult cure.”

Miss Stretton was silent and vanquished.

The next day was bright, clear, glowing, a perfect specimen of autumnal weather. Brooke rejoiced in the sunshine as he walked to Waterloo Bridge to keep the tryst he had made the previous day. He was infinitely relieved ; for a week or two Stasie would be safe, and he would have time to make some plan of action, to come

to some decision, for, though full of grave and terrible doubts, he would not yet allow himself absolutely to believe that Kharapet could be guilty of the base crime he suspected.

Aunt Clem and Stasie did not arrive too early at the station, and Brooke was of very great assistance to them.

He was delighted to see Stasie looking radiant, in a small black velvet Spanish hat, which suited her fair hair and soft complexion.

"Is it not a glorious day, Dr. Brooke? I hope it will be as fine to-morrow! Do you know, I never felt so delighted about an expedition before. I have an odd sensation of escaping, I don't know what!"

"Have you?" said Brooke, looking earnestly, tenderly into her eyes. "Perhaps you are running into danger instead of escaping."

"If so," cried Stasie with a sweet laugh and blush, "you are very ready to thrust me into it! You seem as glad to send me off as I am to go."

"I am, but I shall be still happier to see you return, restored, as I hope you will be."

"Shall you be in London when I come back?"

"Yes, certainly," said Brooke with emphasis. "Tell me," lowering his voice and leaning against the carriage-door, for Stasie had taken her seat, and Aunt Clem had gone to buy a paper for her, "Tell me, has your heart troubled you since? have you felt faint?"

"N—no, just the least little bit, on Sunday, hardly worth mentioning."

Brooke looked down in deep thought, then with a sudden spur from memory he exclaimed, raising his eyes, "By the way, I never thanked you for that helwa. It was very good; do you happen to have any more about you?"

"Yes, that good Bhoodhoo made some last night. I have it here," taking a packet from a little hand-basket.

"Well, pray give it *all* to me! You are better without sweets at present." He took it from her hand, before she had time to resist.

"It is really serious to be on friendly terms with a doctor," said Stasie, laughing. "Are all your profession as tyrannical as yourself?"

"Stasie, my darling child," cried Miss Stretton, "one kiss! the train is just going."

Brooke stepped back, raising his hat. Aunt



Clem bestowed a hasty hug on her niece. The clangorous bell rang out hysterically, and with a smile and wave of the hand, Stasie vanished with the receding train ; while Brooke, unseen by Miss Stretton, hid the packet of helwa in the recesses of his pocket.

END OF VOL. II.





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